UNKNOWN Worlds

8

AUGUST 1943

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HELL HATH FURY . . by Cleve Cartmill

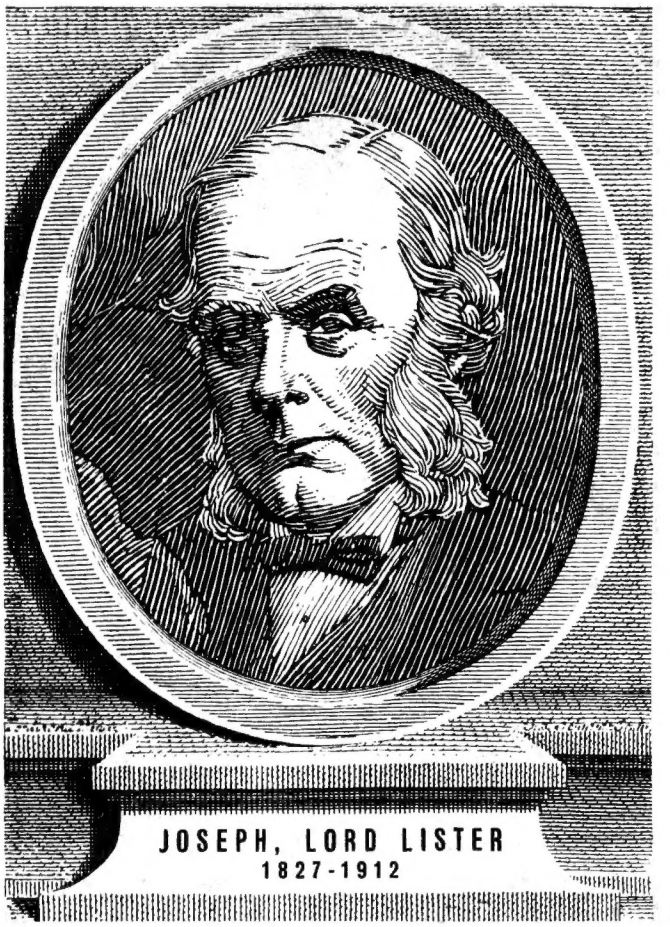
A child can't select his parents—but he can choose which of the two he shall model his life on. Even Billy Roberts thought he should have that right, though his father was a demon and his mother human. But hell had plans for him—and his wishes were not consulted in the matter. Still, he had some of the powers of a demon, and certain powers of a human mortal, too—

GREENFACE . . . . by James H. Schmitz

The first one to see Greenface put it down to heat and beer—a little green horror distilled from a combination of too much of each. Greenface was seen later by others—and presently he was reported as a green horror, but not a little one. Finally, Greenface was a great, green menace—

ONE MAN'S HARP . by Babette Rosmond

An efficient professional gambler can trim the ski-pants off the most accomplished professional winter sportsman. It's not many though, who've gambled for and won the other man's chance of heaven. And not many who, having won that ticket to another man's heaven who'd be calling for the Devil to come and take him away—



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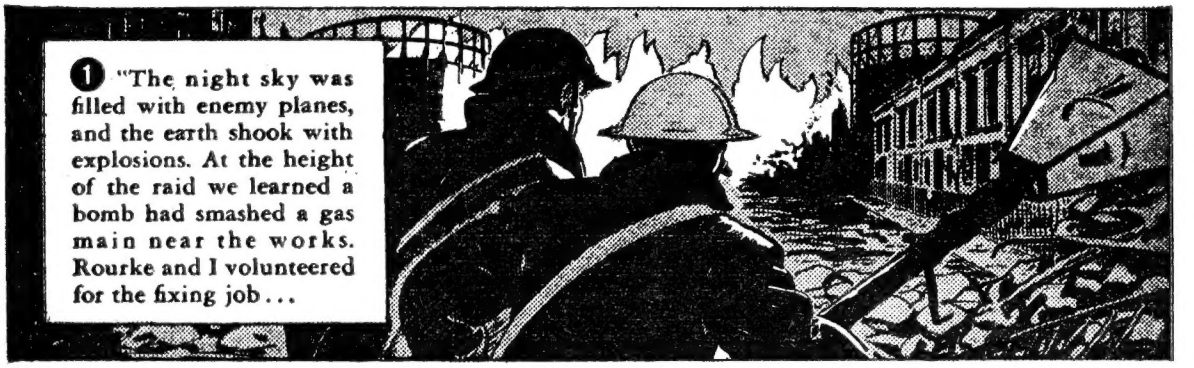
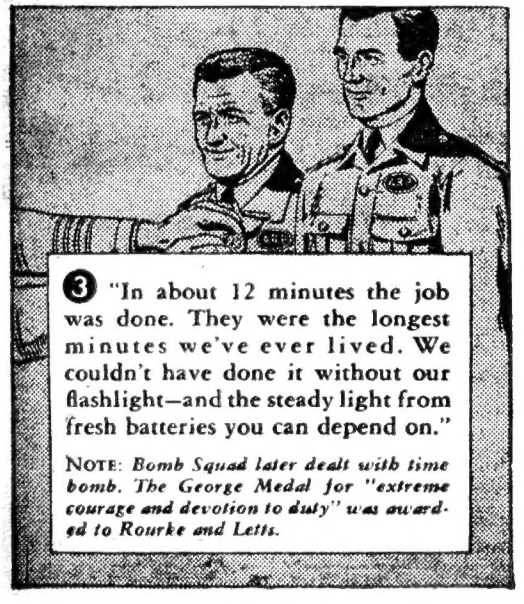


❶ "The night sky was filled with enemy planes, and the earth shook with explosions. At the height of the raid we learned a bomb had smashed a gas main near the works. Rourke and I volunteered for the fixing job...

❷ "We found it," continued Rourke. "A big delayed action bomb sitting on a severed pipe in the middle of a three-foot crater. We set to work. Letts held the flashlight, taking care to shield it so the Nazis couldn't see it, while I blocked the broken pipe with clay.



❸ "In about 12 minutes the job was done. They were the longest minutes we've ever lived. We couldn't have done it without our flashlight—and the steady light from fresh batteries you can depend on."

NOTE: *Bomb Squad later dealt with time bomb. The George Medal for "extreme courage and devotion to duty" was awarded to Rourke and Letts.*

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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Of Things Beyond

Men of scientific training have, in recent years, been making real efforts to determine whether or not telepathy and clairvoyance are reality or folklore. The problem, from the scientific point of view, is exceedingly difficult, because it is inherently not amenable to the basic tenets of the scientific method. Science has found it necessary to set up certain admittedly arbitrary standards. To be fully accepted as fact, a thing must be reproducible at will, anywhere the explicitly stated conditions are fulfilled, by any scientist of reasonable competence.

Headline seekers are to be found in all fields of human endeavor; since learning has long been held in esteem, there have been consistent efforts to gain fame by announcing marvelous discoveries in science. The harsh rule that any such discovery will be accepted as such only when it can be reproduced at will by any competent worker was developed over many centuries, and over many figurative dead bodies. When science was still decidedly uncertain of itself, when its reagents were impure, containing unsuspected foreign adulterants, its instruments poor in quality and unreliable in accuracy, many a discovery was rejected by that rule. Frustrated discoverers, probably in a cold rage, then set their teeth in the task of making an exact study of just what caused their work to succeed, while their confreres failed to reproduce the experiment. It led to heartbreak—but also to the discovery of many a new fact. It led to pure reagents and fanatical exactitude in instruments and laboratory methods.

But it balks hopelessly at the problems of psychic phenomena of nearly all sorts. Telepathy is not reproducible; we don't know how it works, don't know what the exact conditions for its existance are. We do know that some people do not have the power in usable form at all, that others have a sort of negative telepathy or clairvoyance; they persistently get the wrong answer more often then would be probable if they were entirely unguided. The whole phenomenon refuses to fall into the class of things reproducible at will by any competent worker. It certainly isn't a science, and science has a right to refuse it as a scientific fact.

Yet telepathy and clairvoyance of the type tested in the laboratory, are infinitely more open to rigorous examination than forerunners and prophetic dreams and visions. There is a huge mass of evidence on the existence of such things—evidence that would be accepted in any court of law, or start a hundred scientific expeditions if it referred to other and previously accepted matters, or even to a matter akin to some accepted phenomenon.

The accumulation of sworn statements tends to concern death scenes, or other violent crises. Less formal evidence seems to indicate the vision may as frequently, if not, actually, far more frequently, be a simple sort of report of what is going on at some distant point. A navy wife who has a remarkable facility for turning up in the port her husband's ship is calling at the day before the ship comes in, for instance, has no private and highly illegal system of coded communication with her husband. She simply knows where he will be on a certain day. It would be telepathy in action save for one thing; he doesn't know where or when he will reach port next.

There is some very real phenomenon there, a very real faculty behind those unnumbered examples of visions that carried true knowledge. Science does not, and will not, investigate them for a long time to come. No one yet has suggested any method by which the problem can be attacked.

THE EDITOR.

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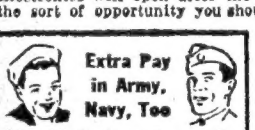

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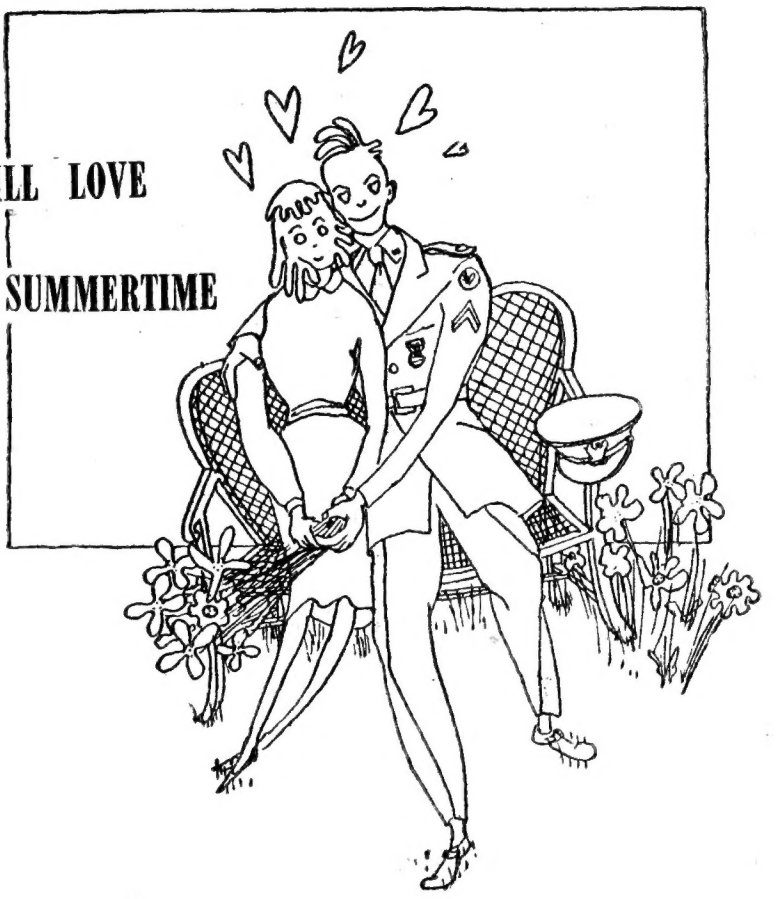

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Hell Hath Fury

by Cleve Cartmill

He was born of a human mother—but his father was a demon. His powers, his reactions, naturally were not human, half demon that he was. But—he naturally did not react as demons would, half human as he was!

Illustrated by Kramer

I.

The switchboard operator thought her eyes were tired; that was as near as she came to the truth. When she looked into the hospital waiting room at the father of the forthcoming child, he seemed faintly out of focus. And so did the old lecher who followed the father with amused yellow eyes. Therefore, her eyes must be tired.

The father acted like any father in a hospital waiting room. He sat down. He looked at his watch. He got up. He walked. He sat down. He looked at his watch.

Handsome devil, she thought, with his thin face, his floppy gray hat, his pin-stripe serge, his . . . his ears. That's all they were, ears. You look close and see it, as soon as you get him in focus. Handsome devil. Quiet, but with fire underneath. It would be wonderful to be loved the way he obviously loved his wife.

It would be wonderful to be loved. Period.

Not by the old goat, though, who yawned on the divan and shot an occasional leer across the counter at her.

She rubbed her eyes. Women, she thought wearily, keeping hospitals up all night, wearing out the help. She'd never had trouble with her eyes, but what with no sleep, routing doctors out of bed, soothing hysterical fathers, running down to Delivery to get the news, it was no wonder—

A light flashed on the board. Delivery. She plugged in, listened, then hurried down the corridor and through the swinging doors. She came back, and she had that old feeling.

She went to the counter between her office and the waiting room, wishing that it was her baby she was reporting on.

"You have a boy, Mr. Roberts," she said mistily. "My congratulations."

He turned with the grace of a healthy cat. "How is he?" he snapped.

The operator misunderstood. "Oh, she's fine. You can see her in a few minutes."

"The child!" he said harshly. "Is he all right?"

"You fathers," she chided. "Listen for yourself."

Thin, indignant wails penetrated the

hospital walls, rising to a high pitch of anger.

The father's face relaxed. It didn't exactly soften, but it shone with dark joy. The operator went back to her board, and the father turned to the old lecher on the divan.

"Chief! He has human form!"

A shaggy white eyebrow widened the distance between itself and the stiff white beard. "Human form," the Chief mused. "What did you expect—butterflies?"

"Think what it means, Chief! He'll influence thousands."

"I suppose he will," the Chief said. "It should be entertaining to watch."

"And if he turns out right," the father persisted eagerly, "we can do it again, and again, and again."

The Chief sort of flowed to his feet. "You have my permission to experiment all you like. Not that it matters. Let me caution you against expecting too much. One's children are never exactly like one's self. I am living proof. But go ahead. It's interesting work." He started away, smoothly, effortlessly, paused and smiled again. "Fun, too," he added.

His eye touched the telephone operator, became speculative. He went to the counter and twinkled at her. She approached expectantly.

"Breakfast?" he suggested.

She almost agreed. There was something compelling about the old goat, and he *was* distinguished, kind of. But she hesitated. There was something repelling, too.

He seemed to reconsider. "Never mind." He patted her cheek, and her skin crawled—voluptuously. "You've probably got a mother or a mortgage." He moved away. "Or both," he added pleasantly, and was gone.

The operator stared after him dreamily. He was a funny one. He had a wolfish smile and insulting speech, but these probably covered a butter heart. You couldn't get angry at him. She wondered if she'd ever see him again.

With a light shock, she saw that the waiting room was empty. Now how had Mr. Roberts managed to leave without her seeing him? Oh, well. He'd probably just stepped out for a breath of fresh air. New fathers needed it, sometimes.

The father went up through pre-dawn blackness away from the hospital to a place of his own making. There Jim Roberts waited, unknowing of events, unconscious of time, of anything.

The father spoke the necessary words and transferred into Jim Roberts' mind a complete memory pattern. Then he placed Jim Roberts outside the hospital door, where Jim drew in great gasps of air and exulted over the fact that he had a son. He recast in his mind the hours of jittery waiting, the telephoning from his job, the rushing out here.

A son. His and Lucille's. How was she, anyway?

He went inside the waiting room. "When can I see my wife?" he asked the operator.

She smiled at him. He certainly was a handsome devil. The thin face, the pin-stripe serge, the floppy hat. Her eyes seemed to be all right now, too. He was sharply in focus.

"You can go up to the second floor, Mr. Roberts. But she won't know you for a while. She's still under the anesthetic."

She lay on the bed, lashes of her closed eyes spilling down over waxen cheeks. He felt for her pulse. It was strong and steady, and he sighed with relief. She was all right. He put a tender hand on her forehead.

Presently she opened her eyes, recognized him. A tired smile moved her full mouth. "I'm going to have a baby," she murmured weakly.

Jim grinned down at her. "You've had it, kid. Hello, mamma."

"It was a boy?"

"It was . . . is, a boy."

She gripped his hand. "Is it all right, Jim? Is it?"

"Sure," he said easily. "Sure."

"Have you seen it?"

"No, but I'm going to, in just a minute."

"Go look at him, Jim!" she urged in a tense whisper. "I've got to know, I've just got to."

He patted her tolerantly and loped out into the corridor where he snagged a nurse. "Can I see my baby?"

"Name?" she asked with a large smile.

"Roberts. Just born."

He thought she gave him a queer look as she went into the nursery. He stood at the big plate of glass, frowning through it as she went into a dim annex and searched through a series of cribs. Presently she brought a bundle to the other side of the window and unwrapped it.

So small, Jim Roberts thought, so small, so red. The little legs, with feet, churning the air. The little hands, waving. The angry face. He blinked, shook his head, and looked again. The —face. He smiled, vaguely uncomfortable for a second, then began waving his hand idiotically. The nurse beamed. Jim Roberts beamed. The baby glowered.

He forgot the strange feeling of momentary discomfort, and galloped back to Lucille's room. She watched him, wide-eyed.

"He's wonderful, kid. He's terrific."

"Honest, Jim? There's nothing wrong with him?"

He smiled with vast, fatherly tolerance. "He hasn't got two heads, or six legs. You can dismiss *that* worry, right now. It's all over. All you have to do is get well and bring him home."

She closed her blue eyes and Jim Roberts fixed the picture in his mind. Gold hair against the pillow, black lashes against pale cheeks, pale lips curved in a grave, satisfied smile. "So sleepy," she whispered.

He held one of her hands in both of his until the nurse came and told him to go away, promising that he could see his wife tomorrow.

They named him William Jerome, called him Billy, and he was six weeks old when the bearded visitor called. Billy could hear the self-introductions through the bedroom door.

Billy comprehended then the dark destiny which awaited the development of this clumsy body which enveloped him. He was cast in a strange, exciting role, and he thought of his puny human shell with impatient contempt. This mess of arms and legs, he knew, was subject to certain natural laws, and he must abide by them always.

But he, with his hybrid make-up, was subject to no law at all, and he was anxious to make that fact known. He listened to conversation in the "parlor."

"My name is Nicholas," the visitor said in his crisp, harsh voice. "Everyone calls me Nick to my face, Old Nick when I'm gone. I knew your uncle Bob in Kansas City. He mentioned once that his nephew lived in this dowdy little town, that he had married a beautiful girl. I see that he was correct. As I had some business matters here, I decided to call. Like St. Nick, whose namesake I am certainly not, I bring presents. For you, Jim, and for you, Lucille."

"Gee!" Jim Roberts breathed. "I've always wanted a rifle like this. Look, honey, it's automatic."

"It's wonderful," Billy Roberts' mother said abstractedly, "but look at this dress. They've never seen one like it in this town. Thank you, Mr. Nicholas."

"Please, Lucille. Nick, if you please. It makes your eyes bluer, and a trifle wicked, my dear. Jim, you may need that gun to ward off suitors when your exciting wife wears her new dress. I sincerely hope so," he added with just the right touch of humor, and the young Roberts couple laughed gayly.

Jim Roberts came back to a social point. "How is Uncle Bob, anyway?

Haven't heard from him in years."

"Oh, he's dead," Old Nick replied. "Been roasting over a fire for four years now." He added sardonically, "May he roast in peace."

There was a little shocked silence. The shock was not concerned with the fact of Uncle Bob's death, but with Old Nick's method of announcing it and his comment. Then they chuckled a little. He was such an ingenuous old codger. He probably didn't mean half the things he said; witness his splendid gifts in memory of his friendship with Uncle Bob. It was likely that he made such remarks to cover up an access of sentimentality, for nearly all old people were sentimental at heart, really.

"Now," he said briskly, "if there's a decent place to eat in this filthy town, I'll take you to dinner. Lucille can show off her new dress. And, Jim, you and I will show off your wife."

"Oh, but we can't," Lucille said. "You have dinner with us. We can't go off and leave the baby."

"Baby? Baby? You have a baby? What a lot of trouble you have in store! May I see the little devil?"

Jim began to glow. Billy could sense it in the next room. "That's what he is, all right," said said. "A little devil."

"He is not," Lucille said stoutly. "You'd cry, too, if you were wet or hungry and couldn't help yourself. He's in here, Nick."

They trooped in to the bassinet, and Billy, who could see as long as the object wasn't too close to his eyes, examined the stranger with a belligerent stare.

He was a slim and dapper old man, with white eyebrows, a stiff white beard, yellow eyes, and a face full of dark humor. He returned Billy's stare unblinkingly.

"He's a queer little character," Old Nick commented.

"How?" Lucille Roberts demanded. "He's perfectly normal."

"Ah, yes, my dear. He is normal, now. But wait until he grows up. He's about half demon, I should say."

"Well," Jim Roberts said with complacence, "he comes by it honestly. I did my share of hell raising when I was a kid."

"Yes," Old Nick mused, "he will take a leaf from your book and add a few of his own."

In that instant, Billy Roberts sensed his own power. He was alone, owing allegiance to none. Old Nick, he could see, expected loyalty and obedience, and his remarks were for Billy's benefit rather than for the couple whose name he bore. Old Nick was accustomed to obedience.

Billy glared steadily into the yellow eyes, vowing never to yield any part of himself save that which pleased him to yield. He must be cautious, he knew. He must never exhibit precocious talents. He must appear to be an ordinary boy. But his double heritage gave him twofold powers, and he was equal to any threat against his independence.

Lucille caught her breath. "How funny! He looks as if he doesn't like you, Nick. As if he were . . . well, thinking. It can't be, of course, but it's a little strange."

"He," Old Nick said with amusement, "is telling me to go to the devil." He smiled, added, "Coals to Newcastle. I imagine, my dear, you'd be surprised if you could see inside your son's mind. No," he amended, "I suppose you wouldn't. Human beings never believe what they are not conditioned to believe."

Billy closed his eyes. He'd made his point. Old Nick knew it was war from this time on. The form that war would take and on what fronts it would be waged would have to wait until he grew up. There were many things to learn.

They spoke of a town. He'd heard talk of "the world." These were some of the things he must learn. But the main fact was clear: he would not give in to Old Nick, or to anybody.

"He's asleep," Lucille said.

"He's plotting," Old Nick amended. "He's figuring a means to do me in the eye."

Jim and Lucille chuckled at the fantastic notion of a handful of baby engaged on such a project. "Isn't he silly?" Lucille said. "What would you like for dinner, Nick?"

"I won't stay, thank you. I must attend to a few matters. Concerning this child, I don't mind telling you."

They jumped to the obvious conclusion. "You're so generous, Nick," Lucille said.

And, "Yeah," Jim added, "don't put yourself out."

"You *will* come back, Nick?" Lucille asked.

His eyes traveled over her, like fingers reading Braille. "Yes, my dear, I'll be back. For one reason, this youngster and I are going to have a showdown one of these days. I have never been defied in this particular fashion. I find it fascinating."

They chuckled again at the fantastic picture he evoked. "He makes the baby sound like a young Machiavelli," Lucille said. "I'm sure he'll grow to like you, Nick, the way we seem to. We never saw you before you came in the door a few minutes ago. Never even heard of you. But it seems as if I've known you all my life. How about you, honey?"

"I feel the same way," Jim said, flicking a glance through the door at his new automatic rifle. "I sure do."

A smile twitched Old Nick's beard. "I grow on people," he murmured, and went away.

II.

Billy Roberts spent the first eight years of his life obeying an ancient admonition: in learning to know himself. In doing so, he impressed the fact of his existence on the village residents somewhat more keenly than his playfellows.

The playfellows themselves were responsible for this notoriety, for they carried home tales of Billy's prowess.

They said he could make himself invisible, for in such games as Hide and Seek, Cops and Robbers, Cowboy and Indians, he excelled in a puzzling manner. The grownups chuckled indulgently at these tales, concluding that Billy was skilled in woodcraft. The youngsters, eager to discard the theory of invisibility, came to adopt this latter view.

They said he was fleet-footed as a deer, which was true, and that he could catch in his bare hands that most elusive of birds, the bobwhite quail.

They were completely silent about his prowess in boyhood fights. If Sammy Jones blacked their eyes or rubbed mud in their hair, they ran home to their mothers with the garbled story. But not one boy ever told what happened to him when he tangled with little Billy Roberts.

The important fact escaped them, was never mentioned: whenever anyone came into contact with Billy, that person got into trouble. But trouble is a habit with children, a burden which they soon learn to carry with all possible equanimity. They never traced it to its source.

But the village thought of Billy Roberts more often than any of its other progeny. He was different. The difference was not important enough to launch investigation, but just enough to arouse a vague civic pride in the boy who showed promise of greater things.

He was not a prodigy. He remained with his own age group in school. True, he seemed to have more leisure time, he worked his lessons more quickly than most, but he did not surge ahead into older groups in the combined grade-high school of Mulveta.

At eight, then, in the third grade, Billy Roberts had explored his nature and capabilities to such an extent that he felt ready to give direction to his activities. He had received no interference from Old Nick or any others of whose existence he alone in the village

was aware. He had not asked for guidance on those rare occasions when Old Nick brought him toys; he had remained aloof and independent.

His first move, too, was his own idea. It involved, indirectly, every person in Mulveta, but it involved particularly his teacher, young Miss Elkins, Marlin Stone, Fred Roth, and the principal of the school, Gary Fargo.

Miss Elkins was young, darkly beautiful, fresh out of State Normal, and fearfully anxious to make good on her first teaching job. She liked her twenty students in the third grade, and they were attentive when she addressed them on that day early in the fall term.

She didn't patronize them; she treated them as intellectual equals. "Several of you," she said in her soft, low voice, "have shown promise in your drawing exercises. I have hopes that one or more of you will enter the Community Chest poster contest about which I am going to tell you."

She explained the Community Chest organization in terms they could understand. She showed them posters which had been used in other years. She explained the purpose of the posters.

"I'll help you in selecting your materials if you like," she said, "and give you all the advice you want. I don't expect all of you to enter a poster, but I do think Frederick Roth, William Roberts, and Samuel Jones should try. All the other classes will have entries, and I'd like my class to be represented. The artist who makes the best poster will receive a ten-dollar prize and a free trip to the county seat where his or her poster will be entered in competition with the winning posters from other schools."

Nobody in the room doubted who would make the best poster in the third grade. Fred Roth had shown an amazing facility with crayon, brush, and charcoal. His drawings had perspective, feeling, and form. If others wished to try, it was for second best; they all knew this.

The larger picture eluded them; they confined the contest to their own room. Even Billy Roberts, with his superior faculties, was hard put to imagine more than the city-wide aspect of the matter. He knew about county seats, but the fact that a nationwide contest was in progress never entered his head.

But nonetheless, he should have proceeded as he did even if he had known. When he walked home with Marlin and Fred that afternoon, and Marlin said, "Geel Ten dollars and a free trip to the county seat!" Billy knew what he was going to do.

When they reached the gate of the Roth bungalow, Fred returned Marlin's books to her and cantered into his yard.

"I'll see ya in the barn right away," Billy called.

"O. K., hurry," Fred answered.

"Can I come, too?" Marlin asked.

"Naw," Billy said. "We got sumpin' private. You go home and make a poster."

Her blue eyes clouded. "I don't know if I can."

"Sure ya can. I'll help ya. Maybe you'll win th' prize."

"Will you help me, Billy? Honest?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

"If you will, maybe I can do a good one. We can work together easy, living next door to each other. Can you come over tonight?"

"You come over. If your father gets a call from the hospital, he won't let us stay there by ourselves, and my family don't care how long you stay at our house."

"I wish I had a mother," she said wistfully. "Then I wouldn't have to stay with people all the time when daddy's operating."

"Don't you like to stay at our house? You don't have to, you know."

"Oh, sure I do. Only I'd like to have a mother to make cocoa and cookies, too."

He was impatient. "Well, so long. See you tonight."

"So long."

He was soon in Fred Roth's barnloft, which alternated as the office of the FBI, a Western saloon, a robbers' roost, a cattle ranch, and Fred's studio.

He soon had the dark, intense youngster mixing thick poster paints while Billy outlined his idea for the poster.

You saw it, no doubt, during the '20s. The baby, with two teeth, not quite smiling, with the barest suggestion of hunger? With the legend: THAT THESE MAY LIVE! GIVE! It was very nearly three-dimensional, wholly so in its effect, and thousands upon thousands of prints adorned billboards, telephone poles, barns, fences, and windows.

Billy drove Fred each afternoon, and directed Marlin each night on a similar poster. Fred finished long before Marlin, which was well, because his unsigned poster disappeared one night, less than a week before the contest closing date. Billy did not allow Fred to become morose, and cut his tears of disappointment short to begin another, different in theme and subject matter.

Fred's second poster was good, far above average, but it was merely the work of a talented, not gifted, eight-year-old.

Principal Gary Fargo finally came to the point of the general assembly. He had introduced the bigwigs on the platform, from the *Sentinel* editor, Joe Wakeman, to that leader of local society, Mrs. Byington-Hill, while students squirmed in the filled auditorium and Old Nick, who was present with Jim and Lucille Roberts, eyed the nubile girls in the senior class.

Principal Fargo gave Miss Elkins, in the audience among her students, a fleeting look that flushed her dark cheeks, and introduced the principal speaker.

"All of us know and admire that outstanding man in our community, Mr. Elvin Markham. Mr. Markham, will you tell them the news?"

Markham heaved his two hundred and twenty pounds to his small feet and came laboriously to the center of the platform. His flabby face took on a look of fatuous pleasure as he polished silver-rimmed spectacles, and everyone in the audience, adult and minor alike, felt patted on the head.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "and I mean the little ladies and gentlemen as well as parents and teachers present." He paused for the laugh. "This school—which we are very proud of, I'm sure you'll all agree"—he paused for a scatter of handclaps—"took part recently in a nation-wide contest."

He described the contest in superlatives, dramatized the spectacle of students burning midnight electricity in the interests of charity. He did this at some length.

"And so we judges, Mrs. Byington-Hill"—a bow to the lady, who returned it—"Mr. Wakeman"—a nod, which got a grin from Joe Wakeman—"and myself met to consider the entries. We had difficulty, I don't mind telling you. Not difficulty in selection, for the winning entry is far better than its competitors, but difficulty in believing that an eight-year-old girl could do such marvelous work."

A murmur ran over the auditorium. Necks craned.

"The winner was submitted late," Markham continued. "A little boy brought it to the judges late at night, explaining that its youthful creator had barely finished and had no time to submit it through her teacher, as the others had been submitted. The judges considered eliminating it on these grounds, but the drawing was so excellent that in the interests of our fair city and the artist herself we could not but award it first prize. I take great pleasure, therefore, and it is a signal honor to do so, in announcing the winner, daughter of our young physician, Dr. Stone, Miss Marlin Stone! And here is her poster."

A thunder of applause greeted the poster. Marlin, sitting beside Billy, caught her breath.

"It's mine! But"—she looked hard at the drawing—"mine wasn't that good." She started to her feet, and Billy grabbed her arm.

"Shut up!" he hissed. "I fixed it for you."

She sank back, while the applause continued.

Miss Elkins was familiar with Marlin's artistic prowess, and knew that the little girl could not have produced the finished work on display. It seemed too professional for even Fred Roth. But Miss Elkins was young, and shrank before the platform full of community leaders. She owed it to her integrity to raise the issue, but she simply couldn't do it. Not there and then.

Fred Roth recognized his drawing, but he would not have faced all those people for a thousand prizes. In addition, he would have given that picture, or anything else he owned, to Marlin if it would bring her pleasure.

Yet the hurt was deep. The picture had disappeared from his barnloft studio, and reappeared here as Marlin's. The inference was obvious. She had stolen it. She didn't have to, he thought as he fought back tears, she didn't have to; she could have had it if she'd asked for it. All she had to do was ask.

And so the prize was awarded to a speechless Marlin. Miss Elkins cursed herself for inaction as the farce went too far for interference. Once the prize was given, she was powerless to speak. They would ask why she hadn't said anything when it was first announced. And why hadn't she? Because she was shy and afraid of her job. Now she must hold her tongue.

Pride and bitterness mingled in Fred Roth's mind as he watched the proceedings. His tongue, too, was tied. He couldn't tell anyone that he was the artist, for such a declaration would react harmfully on Marlin. Nor, he supposed, could Billy tell, for the same reason.

Billy Roberts sensed some of these overtones, but he could not foresee the far-reaching effects of his action. He had been interested simply in creating confusion and unhappiness. He looked first at Miss Elkins, then at Marlin and Fred and knew that he had achieved his ends. But it remained for his father, on a night some weeks later, to explain the full significance of his act—

He knew it was midnight when he awoke, though he had no clock in his room; he just knew. He also knew that the creature who was dim in the darkness was his father. He couldn't have said how he knew, but he did.

His first thought was for Jim and Lucille Roberts, asleep in the next room.

"They won't hear, my son. Even if they were in this room, they wouldn't know that I am here."

"What do you want?" Billy whispered.

"I want to tell you how proud I am of you!" his father said. "What you have done has a touch of genius. When the time comes, you will achieve an eminence denied even to me and my kind, because you have a twisted understanding of human values that I never had."

It didn't make sense to Billy. "I didn't do anything," he said. "I just got the prize for Marlin. She really thinks she drew the picture, now."

Billy's father chuckled. "Ingenuous, too. It will be fascinating to watch those you have involved when that poster is awarded first national prize and brings a measure of fame to this little village."

Billy was silent. He didn't understand what his father was driving at, but the creature seemed disposed to talk.

"With one simple act, my son, you have gained credits that I was years in earning. You have shaken Miss Elkins' faith in herself, and she will consider herself not good enough for that young

Mr. Fargo who desires her. She will throw him over, causing him to become embittered. This will make him suitable material for us. She, in turn, will become an old maid, harsh, self-righteous to the point of fanaticism, and will also be suitable for us."

Billy's father broke off to chuckle again.

"As for the boy, he will never paint again. He will not fulfill the destiny which the Others meant him to fulfill. He will go frustrated through life, and that frustration will drive him into our arms. The girl will observe this, and her suspicion that she was not responsible for the excellent drawing will grow to conviction. She will be reminded of her defalcation on all sides, for that poster will be used for years. This will drive her to excesses that will bring her inevitably to us.

"But this," Billy's father went on, "is only the small part of the larger scene. Each of these persons will meet hundreds of others during their lives, and have his effect on each. It's almost impossible to calculate the extent to which your ingenuity will affect mankind as a whole. For the effect widens, like a pebble dropped in a pool. I tell you, the words or thoughts don't exist with which properly to express my pride in you. Your heritage is stronger than I thought."

Billy began to understand, dimly. One part of himself exulted; another felt sorrow. And all of him felt dissatisfaction.

"I didn't mean to do all that," he said slowly. "It was a joke. I was just trying out something."

His father vented his weird chuckle again. "That's what I meant about heritage, son. You can't help yourself. You must do things like that, as I must, and all the others of us. But you, with your instinctive grasp of human values, accomplish the greatest harm with minimum effort."

Billy caught at the core of his dissatisfaction. "What do you mean, I can't help myself?"

"Exactly that. You are powerless against certain factors in your make-up. These are even strengthened by your native cunning. Oh, it was a happy day when I conceived this plan!"

Billy stuck to the point. He rose up in bed and glared at the creature whose outlines were so vague in the darkness. "You mean I was meant to do that? You planned it? Or Old Nick?"

"Nick will be pleased," his father answered cheerfully. "He'll probably bring you a new bicycle."

Black anger surged through Billy. He had vowed independence, only to find that what he thought was that desirable quality was merely conforming to a behavior pattern over which he had no control.

"New bicycle, huh?" he muttered. "I'll throw it in his face. You get out of here! I don't want to see you any more. I'll show you! And Old Nick, too."

III.

Dr. George Stone watched Billy Roberts through the window of his study. The little boy sat atop a pile of sand in his own back yard and dipped into it with moody fingers. His short blond hair stirred in the Indian-summer breeze, and though all about him on the neighboring hills was riotous autumnal death, the boy had no eyes for vivid trees and brown grasses. He looked at the sand, obviously deep in thought.

Dr. Stone remembered that he, not too many years ago, had been a dreamy child given to solitary meditation. The so-called joys of childhood had become too much for him at times, and he had wandered off alone to think. Was Billy Roberts another of those unfortunates going through life wrapped in the mantle of his own secret dreams?

Unfortunate was the word. Separated from his fellows by sensitivity, self-consciousness, and fear of ridicule, Dr.

Stone had driven straight toward his destiny along a solitary and rigorous path. He was to be a great surgeon, by his own effort. Every fiber of him knew this.

And yet—this was a thing of sadness—he wanted the camaraderie of his fellows. Perhaps the very shyness which made this impossible was responsible for his inherent greatness, but the goal was not wholly desirable—now.

His dark lean face twisted and his intense eyes softened as he remembered when it had been wholly desirable. His narrow hands clenched as he tried to recall, literally recall, the time when his life had been touched with magic.

She had had beauty of form, true; but it was an overall beauty of character that had made Marilyn Webb his alter ego, had filled his days and nights with a sense of completion. She had wanted him to achieve his end for his own sake, not for whatever reflected glory might come her way as his wife.

His striving had taken on impetus, direction, and perspective. Each small success was a major triumph, each loss a spur toward perfection, intensified when they knew she was going to have a child.

Then she had died.

Dr. Stone winced as he thought of the following period. He had acted badly for a while. Though the nurse he had hired was voluble in praise of little Marlin's ability to sleep twenty-two hours each day, though the baby progressed from incubator to bassinet to crib in perfect health, his thoughts of the tiny bundle were venomous.

Then, as she grew, he began to see flashes of character remindful of her mother. He and she became friends, but never more than that.

His calling was responsible. He saw so little of her. She should have someone to care for her, and he couldn't afford to hire a nurse constantly.

Bitter memory clenched his hands again. Other mothers had lived; why had Marilyn been singled out to die in premature birth? Lucille Roberts had lived, Verna Byington-Hill had lived, and all the others. Why not Marilyn?

He did not like to think it had been the late Dr. Grimes' fault. It wasn't ethical. True, the man had been in his sixties, but he had delivered thousands of babies. Dr. Stone shrugged these thoughts away; the old man had gone and he, George Stone, had replaced him. His record in the operating and delivery rooms had so far been brilliant.

He came back abruptly to the purpose which formed in his mind while he looked through the window of his study at Billy Roberts. He must talk to Billy. He shrank from the necessity; hence the train of thought he indulged while shrinking. He could sit here all afternoon and recast his entire life and postpone the interview again. But he had procrastinated too long.

He tried to name the reason why he continued to postpone his talk with the little boy next door. He had always felt a trifle queer about that child he had delivered seven-eight years before. At the moment when he had held the tike by his heels and spanked his bottom, he had felt a momentary flash of discomfort. Others had felt it, too; he could tell by their first quick look at Billy's face, the fleeting frown, the second look, the relaxation. There was nothing wrong with the boy's face; he was quite handsome, as a matter of fact. It was that—well, it took a second look to see him clearly.

Dr. Stone sighed. Procrastination again. With an abrupt gesture he put away the book of anatomy he had been studying and called through the window.

"Oh, Billy!"

The boy turned with a start, looked toward the window, and to Dr. Stone his face seemed to set.

"Come over, will you?"

The boy smiled, and Dr. Stone thought: handsome is hardly the word. He's going to raise hell with some damsel's heart some day.

"Sure," Billy said, and came.

When the boy was seated in the big chair for consulting patients, with milk and a bowl of cookies on the table beside him, Dr. Stone said casually:

"It's sort of lonesome around here without Marlin, isn't it?"

"Sure," Billy said.

"How's school, Billy."

Billy bit off half a cookie, chewed and swallowed before answering. "Same old stuff."

"Billy, I'd like to talk to you about this prize that Marlin won. Do you mind?"

"Nope. I knew that's what you wanted."

Dr. Stone thought: then I was right. This must be cleared up. Marlin has that same high sense of justice her mother had.

The telephone interrupted him. He nodded politely to Billy, said "Excuse me," and took it up in both hands.

It was Mrs. Byington-Hill. "George . . . er, Dr. Stone!" she said fearfully. "It's Gloria. She came home from Miss Petty's school for the week end, and the little darling has something the matter with her throat."

Ordinarily, Dr. Stone would have asked no questions. He would have gone. But Verna Byington-Hill had a tendency to hysteria, went into a tizzy if seven-year-old Gloria stubbed one of her aristocratic toes, and he had to get to the bottom of the truth about Marlin.

So he asked for symptoms, and after weeding out useless biographical data, decided the case was not serious.

"Have her gargle salt and soda in warm water," he prescribed. "If that doesn't bring relief, call me again."

"Now," he said, returning to Billy, "about Marlin. Maybe you know her better than I do. You probably do. But I have a different slant, and I want to tell you about her. She likes things to be right, Billy, and when they are, she's happy. But when they're not, she's sad. See what I mean?"

"Sure."

"Well, then. Now it was quite an honor for Marlin to win that poster prize, and she should have been pleased. Oh, she was, and she was very excited when she won the county award and went to the State capital. But she wasn't as pleased as the ordinary little girl should have been. Do you know why?"

Billy gave Dr. Stone a steady look. "Nope."

Dr. Stone tried another tack. Perhaps, he thought, he was being too precipitous. You don't pry things out of little boys. You suggest.

"Marlin's a pretty good artist, huh, Billy?"

Billy shrugged. "Pretty good."

"I have some of her drawings here." Dr. Stone took a sheaf of paper from a pigeonhole of his desk. "Now I think they're the ordinary drawings a child of her age would make. They don't show exceptional talent. This house, here. Sure, it's a house, but nothing special. And this cow. I never saw horns like these on a cow, did you?"

Billy smiled. "They're funny, all right."

"Exactly. But this poster which she entered. You saw it. You helped her, I believe?"

"Sonie."

"Well, Billy, the whole drawing is too mature, too grown up, that is, for Marlin. It's a picture that could only be drawn by a full-grown artist, a good artist. Now, what I want to know is, how did Marlin come to draw something she couldn't have?"

Billy studied. He took a drink of milk. He looked at the floor. He looked up at Dr. Stone.

"She said it was hers, didn't she?"

"Yes, but she sounded as if she weren't sure."

Billy shrugged. He said nothing.

"Do you like to draw, Billy?" Dr. Stone hoped that the sudden change of tactics might surprise a revealing answer.

"Some," Billy said. – "I'm not much good."

Dr. Stone decided that maybe you don't suggest things, maybe you come right out, man to man, and get an answer that way.

"Billy, I don't think Marlin drew that picture. I don't think she's that much of an artist in the first place, and I don't believe that she has a sufficient grasp of values to have conceived that slogan. Did she draw it?"

Billy looked a trifle bored. "You can ask my folks. She was over to my house at night. She had a picture of a baby, and the words we got out of a book."

Dr. Stone's telephone rang again. So Gloria's throat was worse, he thought. He apologized for the interruption again, and answered. It was a colleague at the county hospital who wanted advice on a certain case. The conversation was long and technical, and Billy was restive before Dr. Stone could return to his questioning. He decided he had shilly-shallied long enough.

"Billy, Marlin didn't make that picture. Who did? I don't want any more evasions."

Billy's wide mouth set in a thin line. He glowered at Dr. Stone. He said nothing.

The telephone rang again. "Dr. Stone!" It was Mrs. Byington-Hill. "I've been trying to call you for fifteen minutes, but your phone was busy. Gloria's worse!"

She described symptoms, and Dr. Stone's free hand reached for his emergency kit. "I'll be right there," he said crisply.

"Hurry, doctor!" There was real agony in this, real human suffering.

He hung up, jumped up. "I should have gone, but I wanted to talk to you, Billy. Run along now, and you might say a prayer for little Gloria Byington."

It was a streptococcic throat, and the little girl was strangling as he ran into the big hilltop mansion left to the young widow by her late, second husband. Dr. Stone felt an old despair as he looked at the suffering child, and he felt the surge of hope, too. There was always a chance, and the fever of that knowledge guided his hands in swift, incisive moves.

Within three minutes he had a hole in her windpipe, and a tube through that hollow cartilage. This let air into her laboring lungs while he went to work on the throat.

He won. After four hours of unremitting work, he knew he had won. And it was not just another piece of brilliance to swell his numerical success, it was a human achievement that lifted him out of the trough of exhaustion to a level of emotion that approached ecstasy.

He left the nurse, who had been summoned from the hospital, in the child's bedroom, and washed up in the ornate guest bathroom. Then he went downstairs to the frantic mother.

The moment he looked at her, he saw her in a new light. Heretofore she had been Verna Byington-Hill of unimpeachable reputation, social arbiter of the community, given to well-publicized works of charity. Verna the indomitable, who had sniffed at local schools and artisans and sent her daughter to Miss Petty's, imported her clothes from European capitals.

Now she was a mother, with no thought of her appearance or ancestry. Her strong, long face was twisted with anxiety, her classic hands clenched in suspense.

She was beautiful, he thought.

He didn't give her a chance to ask the question. "She'll be all right," he said. "Sit down. Relax. You'll be the next patient if you don't."

She didn't sit, she sank. He caught her as she fell and put her on the divan before the great fireplace. He gave her a small jolt of brandy.

Presently she rose to a sitting position and looked into the flickering little fire. There was no artificiality in her now, he thought as he watched. She was real. Perhaps, he thought, all those

things she had done for him in the last three years had been real, too. He hadn't considered her as a human being, and had resented her small gifts to Marlin, the special preparations she had sent over occasionally by her cook. They had been, to him, just part of her "good work" for the needy. But perhaps they had sprung from a real warmth, a desire to bring pleasure to her friends.

He could see evidence of this warmth in her face as the fire threw wavering, exciting shadows on it.

She looked at him. "I don't know how to thank you, George. But you can ask anything of me. Anything."

He didn't question the source of his impulse. The fact that Marlin could be provided for here didn't even enter his mind—consciously.

He said, "Will you marry me, Verna?"

Old Nick came to dinner laden, as usual, with presents. A box of cigars for Jim, a box of candy for Lucille—whose waistline was beginning to show traces of former boxes—and an air rifle for Billy.

Billy took the nickeled, shiny gun gingerly. Since his mother's eyes remained fixed on him, he muttered grudging thanks.

"Is that any way to treat your uncle Nick?" she demanded. "He never comes here but what he brings you something nice. I don't know," she said to Nick, "what's the matter with him. He's never polite to you, even, unless he has to be."

Old Nick's yellow eyes were amused. "He declared war on me the first day I saw him. Remember?"

They thought back over the years. Jim Roberts twisted his thin, lined face

with mental effort. Lucille's beautiful wide eyes clouded with thought.

"That's right," Jim said. "Remember how we laughed about it? That was the day you brought me that swell rifle."

"And," Lucille breathed, "the purple dress."

Billy had slipped off to his room, where he stood the air rifle negligently in a corner. He was aware, and he knew that Nick was aware, that a day of reckoning was approaching. But, he thought furiously, he was only a boy. He didn't have the maturity necessary to try his steel against such an antagonist.

Too, it wasn't smart to tip his hand to the old devil. Why let him know that he, Billy, was aware that they had pushed him around in this matter of the poster. He could rectify such small damage as had been wrought more easily if he worked secretly than if he declared his intention of doing so.

Not, he thought, that the damage was anything serious. He would fix things as soon as Marlin came back. She mustn't know, of course, but he wanted to see how she was taking this success before he made a move.

"Bill-eee?" called his mother at this moment, and he stumped down to the dinner table.

"Well," Old Nick said, "I suppose you've heard the gossip."

Jim and Lucille looked blank. Billy felt a sense of impending disaster.

"Dr. Stone and Mrs. Byington-Hill will legalize their newly discovered passion for each other."

"You mean they're going to get married?" Lucille gasped.

Old Nick looked at the wall clock, but seemed to listen rather than note the time. "At this moment they are becoming . . . er, wife and man." Old Nick grinned. "Which is the proper way to say it in this case, I believe."

"For Marlin's sake, I'm glad," Lucille said. "She'll have new clothes now. But how did it happen?"

Old Nick seemed to be amused and disposed to philosophize. "As it always happens," he said directly to Billy. "An unwary man—or woman—caught up in an apparently aimless series of coincidences, trapped in a net of circumstance." He turned to Lucille. "The good doctor dallied too long today. Heroic measures were then necessary to save little Gloria's life." After a thoughtful pause, he added, "He had a great future."

"Had?" Jim echoed. "What do you mean, had? Why, his picture is in the State medical journal right now. There's a long piece about him. I didn't read it, but it shows he's going places."

Old Nick smiled at Billy. "Can't you just see the effect of all that money on him? And the social whirl? He'll wear white ties and develop a paunch, don't you think?"

Billy stared at his plate. Had they planned this, too? Had he merely been an instrument used in an extension of the poster incident to deny Dr. Stone a destiny designed for him by those "Others" his father had mentioned? What would happen now?

"Will Marlin move up there?" Billy asked.

"That should be interesting to watch," Old Nick said, grinning diabolically. "A girl with strong character and a strong-willed stepmother."

Lucille seemed to be puzzled. "The way you talk, Nick, one would think you knew what's going to happen to everybody. You can't know."

Old Nick smiled. "I am a keen student of human psychology." To Billy, he added, "I have to be."

IV.

Fred Roth pointed his trombone at the ceiling, and into the murk of cigarette smoke and fumes of cheap gin poured a cascade of golden sound. All chatter at the crowded tables of Harry's Roadside Tavern stopped. Boys and girls—it was mainly a high-school crowd

—listened to the singing magic of the horn.

Fred stated the theme in eight bars, with the five-piece band backing him in a tricky sound pattern. Then the "reefers" took hold on his imagination, and he was off on a wild improvisation, a sermon of frenzy that found converts in twitching shoulders and restless hips.

The trombone was like a firewalker. It capered around the melody on the orchestra's hot counterpoint. It zoomed to a high G-sharp, fluttered down an agonized series of minors, writhed through eccentric arpeggios, uttered a wild sweet cry of triumph, and cut.

The darkness of the ill-lighted room pulsed for a moment. That music had been troubling, and eyes met furtively to shift away. There was no passion—yet. That was to come with the next number. But everybody needed a drink. Flasks came from pockets, young hands poured into glasses furnished by—and charged for—by Harry.

Marlin Stone nodded thanks as her escort poured into her glass a strong potion. She didn't really take her attention away from Fred Roth as she did so.

Funny, she thought, what happened to people. Freddie, for instance. He had ignored her for years, and now all of a sudden he was camping on her doorstep. He hadn't liked her since they were kids in grade school together, but now he was broken out in a rash of desire. She found it exciting, and she wondered what he'd do about her coming here with Jerry Folsom. He'd do something, if that burning look he sent her through the haze meant anything. His eyes were funny tonight. That was love, maybe, and not the weed that Gloria, the little prude, had said he smoked.

Fred's innards churned as he watched her from the platform. She was classy, all right. His mind skirted the word "lovely," accepted it. It was not a word he customarily used, but it applied to Marlin. No lack of masculinity was implied by using it in connection with Marlin. Jerry Folsom would use it without hesitation. But then Jerry was president of the senior class, the jerk, and could get away with it. Something should be done about Jerry. First, though, he had a song to play for Marlin.

It didn't have a name, this song. It didn't have anything, not even form. It wasn't born yet, but it was being born—in desire. It would play itself as it went along. He got to his feet and sent Marlin a twisted little smile.

He dropped softly into the melody and let it play itself, this sweet and terrible ache in his heart. The gay despair and bitter love of adolescence, the joyful sadness of a night in white December, the creeping swiftness of mad spring days, the innocent wisdom of youth, and, above all, the slow swoop of the Dark Angel himself—all these were in his nameless little tune.

Sammy Saltzer felt his hackles rise. A slow, sweet chill flickered along his spine as he raised his clarinet and blew a soft, high wail, a stinging stream of silver to the trombone's golden croon.

Rocky Flood looked back across the years, at all the empty glasses, at all the panting blondes, at all the papered walls, the cheap carpets, the creaking stairs of sad hotels. His left hand caught the beat with simple chords, but his right twisted a treble snarl from the piano keys, a snarl at middle age and failure.

Ray Blochner lifted his saxophone and saw, spread out before him, a future as empty as his past as this boy made magic with his horn; a future purply-touched with madness, no love, no hate, no evermore, but liquor, drugs, and hypodermic shots in the arm of happiness. He whispered into his horn a reeling, drunken counterpoint to the clarinet's high wail.

Slappy Hacks flicked the strings of his bull fiddle and thought of a little flower, a little blue flower blooming all alone in the cow pasture last year when he was still a boy. He had picked it and had taken it that night to the girl on the neighboring farm. She had cried, for

nobody had ever given her a flower before. Now, hearing wizardry flowing from Freddie's golden horn, Slappy cried as he remembered, leaving her beautiful and lonely like the little flower had been. He took the beat from Rocky Flood and made each note a tonal footstep of Time, marching to that precipice which is the end of Time and of everything.

And even though a few of the boys and girls there were tone deaf, even though clean harmonic patterns meant nothing to their untrained ears, all were caught up in the resistless force of this music. Tension mounted, silence fell, and all felt that something was going to happen. Hands gripped glasses, eyes fixed on space, shoulders tightened, stomach muscles grew rigid. Something *had* to happen; the human frame could not hold such emotions as were aroused by this jig saw of sound.

It happened. It happened quickly, and nobody knew how, or why, or who did it.

When the music ended on a complicated chord, Fred Roth put his horn in its rack and walked to Marlin's table. He was followed by the rest of the band, except for Slappy Hacks, for a variety of reasons. Ray Blochner went along because Freddie looked as if he might start something interesting; Sammy Saltzer because he was still caught up in the restrained frenzy of that last number and followed Freddie in person as he had on his clarinet; Rocky Flood because he had a fuddled sense of responsibility.

"Where you going, kid?" Rocky had said when Freddie stepped off the platform. Getting no reply, Rocky laid hold of Freddie's arm. "Wait, kid. Take it easy, whatever it is." When Freddie had flung off his hand, Rocky went along. The kid was so young, and some day Rocky must caution him about using so much "tea." It was bad for you at that age.

Only Slappy Hacks remained on the platform, salting his memories with tears of despair.

Fred was drugged by marihuana and by the ache in his heart. Not even he could reconstruct that maelstrom of thought which swirled inside his head. Something had to be done about Jerry; that was the simple motivation.

And either he, or Ray Blochner, or Sammy Saltzer, or Rocky Flood, or all of them together—did it.

Fred stood stiffly beside the table and fixed glazed eyes on Jerry Folsom. A long lock of black hair fell down over his forehead and he brushed it back with a slim, shaking hand.

"Leave my girl alone," he said evenly.

"Now take it easy, kid," Rocky said into his ear.

Jerry was instantly on his feet, and Marlin sprang between them. "Stop it!" she cried. "Freddie, go back to the bandstand. Don't start anything!"

He flung her aside with impersonal negligence, and she fell against the wall. Jerry Folsom started a roundhouse swing. Rocky Flood caught at Fred. Ray Blochner picked out an inoffensive youth at the next table and hit him on the ear. Sammy Saltzer blinked uncertainly.

And at that instant, Harry, bulking behind his soda fountain, switched off the lights.

He shouldn't have, of course. There was no point in it when just kids were brawling. But Harry had been conditioned in pre-prohibition bars on water fronts, in mining towns, and in lumber camps, and his action was instinctive. Many times in the past a quick finger on the light switch had saved lives.

But there was no shooting here, though the crack of Jerry Folsom's neck sounded like a pistol shot above the confused babble. When the lights were up again, the musicians were gone, Jerry lay dead, and nobody knew how it came about.

Fred Roth walked blindly along the street. Something had happened; he knew that. But what, or to whom, or by

whom, were mysteries. His only clear knowledge was the need for flight, though innate caution checked his pace to an innocent amble. He spoke to none that he met or passed, and the bearded stranger who accosted him under a street lamp had to speak twice, sharply, before he halted.

"Going far?" the stranger asked casually.

Fred blinked in an effort to bring the questioner into focus. It looked like—it was old Yellow Eyes who visited the Robertses now and then. Nick, Billy called him.

"What's it to you?" Fred growled.

"Nothing, nothing," Old Nick said pleasantly. "I have a natural mild interest, but it isn't burning. Good night."

Fred walked on. He didn't pause when Old Nick called after him, "I'll be seeing you—some day."

Marlin had to try her door key three times before she could enter the big hilltop house which she had referred to as home for eight years and thought of as a place to cache her stockings. Light filtered through the crack of an upstairs door, her father's door. She thought, with a bitter despair, that something like this had to happen before she came home while somebody was still up.

She put knuckles to the door softly, entered when Dr. Stone said, "Come."

He looked, she thought, exactly the sort to whom you'd take a problem like this. Rather soft with good living, steady-eyed, distinguished, with gray-flecked hair, and his long dark face carried a hint of cynical wisdom. He was impeccable, as always since he had married the lady of the manor, even in dressing gown and pajamas.

He turned from the open medical journal on his desk as she entered, said with quiet sarcasm, "Home already?"

It was a complete statement of complaints of her behavior for the past several years, and yet it carried a hint of bewilderment, a touch of sadness. This daughter of his, so piquant in sweater and skirt, with a certain hardness in the youthful face framed in masses of red-gold hair, hadn't turned out too well, and he didn't know whether it was his fault or not. He didn't know. He had done what he could, he felt smugly certain, but had it been enough, or as much as he should have done?

Then he saw that she was on the verge of hysteria. She twisted her hands, there was fear around her whitening mouth, and her eyes were overwide.

Her voice was steady with effort. "I'm in trouble, father."

She could see him age. Lines deepened around his mouth, which was beginning to lose its tightness; his eyes, once clear with high resolve, clouded with pain.

"Again?" he said wearily. "What now?"

"The boy I was with was killed at Harry's tonight."

Once the words were out, she seemed ready to collapse, and he helped her into a chair.

"Killed?" he cried.

She was trembling. "Jerry Folsom. He was my date, and I feel responsible to a certain extent. I . . . I don't know what to do, father!"

There was agony in her cry, and uncertainty. He put a hand on her head. "Tell me about it quietly, Marlin."

She told him the sequence of events. She mentioned no names, save Jerry Folsom's.

"Everybody ran away," she said. "I won't be drawn into it if I just keep my mouth shut. But somebody killed him, and I know it was one of four, or all of them. I've got to tell the constable, because nobody else will. They're all scared to death. All of us were there—" She hesitated, flicked him a look of embarrassment mingled with defiance, began again: "You might as well know. Everybody will soon. We were out there drinking bootleg gin, and if it comes out, there'll be a terrible scandal. But I've got to be honest, I've got to tell

what I know. And I need—somebody to go along." She almost broke down. "I'm afraid to go by myself."

Dr. Stone's mouth drooped at one corner. His face twisted with real pain and distaste.

"It would be very unwise for you to become publicly involved," he said slowly.

"Because of Verna?" she flared. "And Gloria? Can't you think of anybody but yourself? Sure, they'd tell you what a rotten daughter you have, but a boy's dead!" Her voice rose. "A boy's dead, do you hear?"

"Marlin!" he said sharply. "Control yourself!"

She twisted a wry smile at him. There was contempt in it. "I'm all right now," she said quietly.

He turned away, wrung out a cry of despair. "Marlin! Marlin, why have you done these things? You have a home here, more comfortable than others, but you've been dissatisfied ever since we came. You've made a name for yourself. The wild Marlin Stone. I don't know," he said, "what makes you do it."

"Home!" she snorted. "Homes are supposed to have warmth. You're supposed to be friends with people in your own home. Every breath I draw around here is examined—down somebody's nose. I hate this place! Look what it's done to you."

He blinked uncertainly, but there was no uncertainty in his heart. He knew what she meant, and flinched as she went on to say it in the harsh, brutal words of youth.

"You were going to be a surgeon once," she said bitterly. "Now you're a society doctor. You dress up Verna's parties and get big fees from bored women who need a good spanking. So you give 'em pills. You've thrown away everything you've ever wanted, just because that woman liked to have a man around the place. Well, I'm glad you're some use to her. You've never been any use to me!"

Dr. Stone revived an old memory. This came about, he thought wearily, because I believed once that Marlin was taking something she didn't deserve; and Heaven help me, I still believe it.

"Let's get out of here, father!" Marlin went on passionately. "It isn't too late! Let's go back to our little house. We got along all right there. We can do it again. You've still got years ahead of you. Let's get out, father, now!"

Dr. Stone looked at his hands. Once they had been magical, swift, sure, and tender. Now they were just hands.

And yet this was not the main consideration. He knew it too well. He could regain facility. Not all, but enough. He could be a surgeon again. But there was Verna. What would people say if he left her? What would she say, what would she do? He knew she would never let him go. She just wouldn't. She clung.

"It's too late," he said. There was despair in it.

"So?" Marlin said with quiet scorn. "All right, it's too late. But not for me. I'm going. Now."

From some inner recess, Dr. Stone acquired a measure of parental sternness and philosophy. "Marlin, you're still young. Troubles seem overwhelming at your age, and you are inclined to act rashly without consideration of the future. Where will you go if you leave?"

"To the police, first," she grated. "Here we sit gabbing about our own little troubles, and Jerry Folsom lies dead on a speakeasy floor. Where will he go?"

"But what good can you do?" her father protested. "You can't bring him back to life. All you can accomplish is to get yourself—and all of us—embroiled in a scandal. You can't do anybody any good."

"Maybe I want to turn over a new leaf," she replied evenly. "I've helped to bring about conditions that caused Jerry's death. Maybe I can prevent others. You . . . you won't go with

me?" she asked with quiet finality.

"Sleep on it, Marlin," he pleaded. "There is no need to go tonight."

She gave him a look, but no answer. Then she was out of the room and the sound of hurried feet down the stairs came back to him. Dr. Stone jumped to his feet. He half started after her, but caught himself in time. If he went out like this, Verna would be displeased.

He pulled on some clothes hastily, and ran outside. Marlin had disappeared. He started down the road toward the village, but halted after a few steps. His shoulders slumped, and he turned back.

"Good evening, Dr. Stone," said a voice.

Dr. Stone started, looked toward the voice, recognized that old visitor of the Robertses. Nick, they called him.

"Good evening," he replied. He fidgeted for a moment when Old Nick said nothing. Then, "Excuse me," he said brusquely. "I haven't time for a chat tonight."

"Surely," said Old Nick. "There'll be plenty of time—later."

V.

There was a deep, underlying pattern of tragedy; and Billy Roberts recognized it, felt it. But he could not quench a flickering inner amusement as he waited for Marlin outside the courthouse, watched the crowd pour out in a gabbling stream, caught snatches of low-voiced comment.

"They had to hush it up, I tell—"

"—ought to be horsewhipped, letting kids—"

"What will this younger generation—"

"Well, my daughter was safe at—"

He was not outwardly amused. His long face was as grim as theirs, his wide mouth as straight, his blue eyes as solemn. The cynicism was inside, a slight contempt for civic pride which had quashed Marlin's testimony, had moved the coroner's jury to bring in a verdict of "death by misadventure."

Jerry Folsom, he reflected, was one more sacrifice on the altar of prohibition now. Just as militant Drys had made much of similar events before the Eighteenth Amendment was passed, so did they now cloak this incident in a mantle of community righteousness. If a report of the ruckus at Harry's should hit press association wires, the nation would brand Mulveta as a sink of iniquity, and the growing movement toward repeal would take impetus from the fact that this little town had screamed loudly for denial of a man's right to take a drink in the open.

So there would be no investigation. Harry would be warned to stay out of the community, and parents would be more vigilant in regulation of their children's movements—for a while. But the name of Mulveta would not be blackened in the land. That fair flower of negation would continue to bloom whitely though its roots were set in death.

Presently Marlin came, stony-eyed, bitter-mouthed, clenched hands swinging against her plaid skirt. Billy fell in beside her and waited until they were alone on the noon-baked street before he spoke.

"Welcome back," he said.

She started, eyed him with surprise. "Oh, it's you. What did you do, throw away your veil?"

"I'm back in circulation," he admitted.

"That gladsome sound," she sneered, "is the hearts of maidens, leaping. The hermit has come out of his cave. How do you like our little town, now that you've taken a public look?"

"How do you like it," he countered, "now that you've been dragged back to it?"

"Oh, I love it. I've got a beautiful room in my prison with a view. My keeper is something that was a man once. You must come up and see the new bars on my window."

"They had a legal right to bring you

back," he pointed out. "You're not eighteen yet. What were you running from, anyway?"

"To," she corrected. "I was running to. When they told me I was not to tell exactly what happened at Harry's, I ran off to find some place that cared more for a life than civic virtue."

"Did you find it?"

"I guess not," she said wearily. "I guess any other place would be the same. What difference does it make? What do you want, anyway? Must be something brewing to make you come out of your shell."

painted the poster which had brought her national notice.

"Have you tried his home?" she asked finally.

"He hasn't been there since the night at Harry's."

She frowned down at her black and white shoes. "There's a little dive over at Elton," she said slowly. "He took me there once. It has rooms upstairs. I was headed there, to make him come home and tell what happened to Jerry, but father caught me. You might try it. Blackie's, it's called."

"Thanks." He turned away and

"Where's Fred?"

"How should I know? Why do you want to see him? You've been enemies for years now."

Billy put his new resolution into words for the first time. "I want to straighten out something that happened a long time ago."

Marlin stopped, fixed her dark eyes on his. They looked wordlessly at each other. She wanted to ask questions, to bring an eight-year suspicion into the open, but she couldn't. She couldn't bear to know finally that she had not

walked toward the interurban line which ran between Mulveta and the county seat.

"Billy," she called after him. He halted. "Are you sure you're—doing the right thing?"

"I'm sure," he said, and went on.

Billy had to confess, as the interurban rattled through green fields and across Turkey Creek toward Elton, that he was not sure at all. But the experiment should be interesting.

He looked through the window at old

Kirby's stand of young corn, and compared himself to the slender green stalks reaching to the sun. They were tended, supervised in their struggles toward maturity, but he was on his own. Nobody would offer him support in this move against his father and Old Nick.

He tried to imagine what forces would be brought to bear against him, so that he could protect himself, but what acts his own would inspire were beyond imagination. He must wait and see. One thing he did know: he was going through with this as long as he had life.

Man or demon, demon and/or man, Billy Roberts was not going to be pushed around any longer.

He had fought a losing passive fight; now he was going to carry the battle into their camp.

Jerry Folsom's death had awakened his dormant resolve, dormant because he had not felt capable of outright rebellion—he had been too young. That feeling of youthfulness had been responsible for eight years of procrastination. He had not known how to act wisely when honor after honor was heaped upon Marlin until it was nationwide in scope. So he had waited, kept quiet.

Not altogether, for parental heritage was too strong. There had been the time Jim Roberts had taken him to St Louis to buy his first long trousers, and he had misdirected a frantic man in the railroad station.

The man had leaped on the wrong train as it moved out. Billy had giggled: It had been a good joke.

But he had learned, in one of the midnight visits of his father, that the man had not reached an important conference in time to prevent chicanery that was to involve millions of innocent people.

He had been further embittered when he had learned this. A normal childish impulse had played into their hands again.

Childish impulse. He had thought about this. Other children, young and old, had played and would play practical jokes. Were such acts diabolic in origin?

He thought not. They stemmed from a streak of human cussedness, and he doubtless had his share. But he had been assured once by his father that he was the only one of his kind. He was an experiment, endowed with a conscious will to destroy moral fiber. If he submitted to that side of his heritage and took advantage of certain special abilities, he could throw a comparatively large section of humanity into such confusion that highly desirable excesses, from his father's point of view, would result.

Then others like him would be produced, an organized cabal of evil, bent upon destruction of morale and morality.

Which was all right with Billy. He cared nothing for the moves and countermoves of Old Nick and the Others mentioned occasionally by his father. But he did resent being a tool, and had fought against it for eight years.

He had not succeeded altogether, for there had been other incidents like the man and the train. But he had succeeded in the main, for he had withdrawn from contact with others. The Hermit, schoolfellows called him. Sure, he was lonesome, plenty. But he had had to think his problem through, and at the same time not contribute to the aims and purposes of his father and Old Nick.

Passive stubbornness had been the only weapon Billy knew how to use, and he had used it against his father, who had come to exhort him at midnight, against Jim and Lucille Roberts, who were honestly worried about his seclusive habits, and against Old Nick, who pretended solicitude with an amused gleam in his yellow eyes. And he had won out to some extent; his father hadn't appeared for a long time, Jim and Lucille as well as the townspeople came to accept his self-enforced solitude as

part of his nature, and Old Nick left him alone.

But the death of Jerry Folsom drove him to action. He recognized it as one of the ramifications of that childhood incident which had diverted a few lives from intended channels. He recognized also that it would not end there. He could not change efferts already wrought, but he could try to restore to their destinies Fred Roth, Dr. Stone, Miss Elkins, and Gary Fargo.

He rapped on Blackie's locked door, and presently a panel slid back to reveal a face.

"I want to see Fred Roth," Billy said.

"Never heard of him," the face replied.

"He's here," Billy said. "I know he's here."

He did know, too. He couldn't have told you how, because that was part of his heritage you couldn't understand, but he knew.

The face didn't reply. It withdrew, and the panel closed.

Billy looked about him. Men and women were abroad, and doubtless one or more had him under unconscious observation. He eyed the office building across the street. Idle eyes might be on him there, too. Roving glances touched him, also, from passing cars. This was the wrong entrance for him to use—that way.

He walked leisurely to the corner, left to the alley, up it to Blackie's back door. After he made certain nobody was watching him, he simply walked through the door and upstairs to the dingy hall. Rooms opened off this. When he came to the door of Fred Roth's room, he knew he was in for trouble.

The voice that had denied knowledge of Fred Roth was speaking. "And if he knows you're here, so do other people. You got to blow."

Billy identified it with some surprise as the voice of a woman. He listened for the answer. It came from a stranger, to him.

"With the most exquisite pleasure, my dunghill rose. But we can't go out in nothing but pants. Give us the rest of our clothes, Blackie."

A third voice made derisive comment. "Give, Blochner? Blackie wouldn't *give* us a second thought. She'd charge for it. Huh, Blackie?"

"I'm not in this business for my health, Sammy Saltzer," Blackie replied harshly. "I get a hundred bucks, you get your duds."

"Oh," said another voice wearily, "go take a bath. Or open a window. We haven't got a hundred dollars."

"No dough, no duds," Blackie said firmly. "And you can put that on your thumbnail and sniff it, Rocky Flood."

"But on the other hand," Ray Blochner put in, "no duds, no dough, my essence of garbage. Stalemate."

"Stale or not," Blackie retorted. "Gonna get my dough. And you cokies are gonna blow."

"How do you *like* that?" Sammy Saltzer said to the world at large. "What a brain, what a brain!"

Billy put knuckles to the door, saw it nearly jerked off its hinges to reveal a huge female with lank gray hair, undersized eyes and oversized chin.

One of her large red hands leaped at Billy's throat, and a small flicker of surprise touched her eyes when the hand closed on air. She blinked, looked at him closely.

"Whadda you want?" she snarled.

"Fred Roth," Billy said quietly.

"Snap out of it, Freddie," Sammy Saltzer said behind Blackie. "The marines are here now."

"How'd you—" Blackie began. She broke off, thought for a second, and demanded vehemently, "How *did* you get in?"

"Probably," Ray Blochner observed quietly, "through the holes in the plaster. Most anybody could."

"I want Fred Roth," Billy repeated.

"You get a kick in the stomach," Blackie growled, "if you don't scram outa here, punk."

Billy saw Fred raise himself on the bed and turn a look of tired resignation toward the door. "Who is it, police? Oh, hello, Bill. Come on in."

Blackie made a blocking motion, but before it was completed, Billy was inside the stale-aired room. Blackie stared at him, at her hands, and her loose face seemed to come to pieces for a second. Then she stood very still, watching intently.

"Get your clothes," Billy said; "we're going home."

"You got a C note?" Blackie demanded. "That's what it takes to get him outa here."

A small, contemptuous rage began to flicker in Billy. It was a new sensation to him, full of exhilaration and promise of wild excitement. What a pleasure it would be to give these clods an experience that would haunt them to their graves! To provide them with a strange illusion that would shatter moral fiber. Something they could not believe, but dared not doubt.

There lay his true destiny, and he knew it in a sudden surge of flaming hatred for these and their kind. They were created for his own amusement, and no greater joy existed than to see them broken slowly, exquisitely; to see them and their million brothers break themselves by futile resistance to forces they could never know or comprehend; to see them die, old and empty, unknowing of what had gone before or what was still to come.

Yes, and to see hope wither on its stem, and bitterness flower sullenly as they forever reached for a goal held slyly beyond their groping; to see them subside at last back into the morass of circumstance in whose creation they never had a hand.

He threw off these thoughts abruptly, for they were his father talking. To accede to their urging was to remain a tool, and he had come here to break their hold. He looked in some astonishment at the expressions of Blackie, Ray Blochner, Rocky Flood, and Sammy Saltzer. Fred Roth had apparently dropped his head into his cupped hands, but the others looked at him in—not exactly awe, or fear, or worship, but something of all, these were in their widened eyes.

Had he been transformed by his own thoughts? Surely not, for this shell was a human body, bound by familiar laws.

He could consciously apply certain formulas known instinctively to himself to create phenomena, but so could they, if they knew. Surely, thoughts alone, whether born in passive contemplation or driving emotion, could not change him.

Apparently something had, or they thought it had. But now their eyes began to change. Relief grew, as if they had wakened from a realistic dream. Now they recognized it as a dream, but still some of its effect remained.

"Get your clothes," Billy said to Fred Roth.

He raised his young, utterly weary face and looked at Blackie with a question. She answered abstractedly, with a trace of fear.

"I'll get 'em," she said quietly, and went away.

Fred blinked, looked at Billy, at the others. "What goes on here?"

They didn't answer. They looked away, at the spotted walls, at the peeled ceiling. Billy waited quietly.

Blackie returned with a pile of coats, shirts, socks and shoes. She flung them on the floor.

"Now get out of here," she said hoarsely.

While they dressed, Billy recounted events up to and including the inquest.

"Nobody's looking for you," he said. "It's all over. You guys, though, had better go somewhere else. Fred stays here, at least till I get through talking to him."

They nodded agreement. Rocky Flood put on his shoes and kicked out the single windowpane.

"The foul air," he explained, "was beginning to get me. I was seeing things."

Sammy Saltzer and Ray Blochner seemed to leap at this explanation. Puzzlement went out of their eyes. They smiled.

They didn't see Blackie as they clattered downstairs and out to the street. Sammy, Ray and Rocky shook hands with Fred. They went off on separate ways.

Fred stared after them, turned to Billy. "Did I miss something? They act awful funny. And Blackie, the old—"

"Never mind," Billy said. "Let's go home. I got things to say to you."

Old Nick was on the interurban. Billy pretended not to see him, but all the way to Mulveta he could feel amused yellow eyes on the back of his neck.

VI.

Billy's father came that night, with words as bracing as an icy shower. Billy lay in the midnight blackness with his eyes closed, listening. He no longer attempted to get a clear look at this creature; his appearance was no longer a matter of interest. But his words were, tonight.

"Now you have tasted it," his father said. "You know the thrill of your heritage, and you will never let it go. The memory of your brief experience this afternoon will drive you to rages more transforming than today's flicker. By the judicious use of hate and anger, you will come into your own."

His own? Billy wondered what that might be, specifically. He had never had a clear picture of what he was meant to do or become; all his father's comments and all his own thoughts had dealt with rather broad generalities.

But he didn't interrupt to ask. He lay with his eyes closed, remembering the delicious excitement of the afternoon, when he had become—well, Something. He couldn't say what, for he had not been conscious of change. Neither could he interpret the expressions of those who had seen the transformation.

"I come to praise you again," his father continued. "You brought a change into the lives of four persons this afternoon that will affect large sections of mankind. Moral dissolution had already begun to set in, and by driving them out into wider fields you will have extended the effects of that dissolution to important proportions. The three musicians will join separate organizations. By their virtuosity they will command the respect of their fellows, and by their conduct lead them into excesses which will inject madness into their music. All who hear them will be stimulated to develop habit patterns which we can view with delight.

"As for the woman, she will go into business in a large center of population. Haunted by what she saw today, she will seek wilder and wilder diversions. She will be highly successful in attracting larger and larger crowds, because of entertainments she will provide for their senses. She will be imitated by other entrepreneurs until the impact of what you have done today will spread across the civilized world."

"So," Billy thought. "So. Whatever I do, I play into their hands. Still a tool, that's Roberts. Too late now to stop Blackie, Ray, Sammy, and Rocky. That's done, and they'll go right out and have their effect. But these others, these four. Fred, Dr. Stone, Miss Elkins, Mr. Fargo. They can be put back on their paths."

His father shrugged Fred off into the future. "I must confess, my son, that your plan for the boy Fred Roth seems obscure. But, as I have remarked before, you have an instinctive grasp of human values that I cannot have. So I wait and watch—all of us do—with fascination."

Billy's emotion changed from wariness to tentative triumph. Was this possible? Heretofore, his father had been able to analyze the motives behind any of his acts in detail. But that was when Billy, consciously or uncon-

sciously, had the same broad aims as his father. Now that the aim and purpose were radically opposed to his father's, that creature did not understand.

It was too soon to say with certainty that such was the case, but it was not too soon to watch, to analyze, to plan.

"Frankly," his father went on, "your treatment of his case this afternoon aroused some criticism, and suggestions for corrective measures were made by—some. But I counseled that we wait and watch. You have brought my predictions to brilliant reality in the past, and there exists no reason why you should not continue to do so.

"There is every reason why you should."

Billy interrupted with a small, trial deceit. "I just told Fred that he really painted that poster, and that he'd be a sap not to take up art again. He believed it, because it's true. You got to tell enough truth to make people take whatever else you want to tell 'em."

There was a small, fragile silence in the darkness. Billy's father broke it with a dry chuckle.

"I see. I see, my son. In your first awareness of power, you are experimenting with elaboration, with complex misdirection. You have the ability to succeed, and results are so much more gratifying than those obtained with simple acts. There will be no more criticism. There will be no corrective measures. You have my word on it."

Billy wanted to ask about these corrective measures. But he did not, for to display too much interest might arouse suspicions of his critics, of whom there were apparently some in his father's circle. He said:

"What did you mean, come into my own?"

His father hesitated for a long moment. "The steps by which you will develop to full stature will depend upon how you apply yourself to chosen tasks, and cannot be told now. I may say, however, that as a reward for what you accomplished today, your tongue has been—ah, touched. From now on you will say exactly the right word at the right time. This power has heretofore been granted only to those who wished to sell their souls. They are not many, I am sorry to say. It has been fascinating to see the uses to which they put this power. At present there is only one, a house painter in some European country, Austria, I believe. But this is a gift to you, and you can become a leader of men if you choose."

Billy lay in the darkness, smiling to himself after his father had gone. A new poise, a new confidence, was solid and calm within himself. His was now a power with unlimited uses. He felt that he could even turn it against Old Nick and his father if he liked. That would be pleasant, he thought.

Cynthia Elkins had been ready for an hour. She glanced at her watch for the fiftieth time, and for the twentieth time left the front window of her little cottage to give a last look at herself in the bedroom mirror.

She couldn't see much more than her head and shoulders in the oval glass, but she searched her image as if it were an examination paper she suspected of containing an undotted "i." She smiled at herself. "You don't *look* twenty-nine," she thought. "Old Lady Elkins, indeed! It's just that the cruel little brats call everyone Old Lady This or Old Man That. No, your eyes and hair are dark and shining, your face and throat are smooth, and you look a little wicked with that fancy collar against the dark-blue dress. Why, you're blushing! Well, it's nice to *look* a little wicked—for him. He'll notice. He notices everything. He'll even notice—

"Quit starting guiltily! This is your own house, and you're alone in it. Go ahead and look at your legs if you want. They're yours, aren't they? You can stand on that chair and get a pretty good look in the mirror. There! Hike the skirt a little. No, too high. People would talk. They'll talk, anyway.

"But why should they? You're performing an act of kindness. He's lonely, and would like an evening of intelligent conversation. He said so. It's an act of kindness. You can get down off the chair now.

"No, no lipstick. Do you want to look like a painted hussy? Do you want to look like that Marlin Stone? No lipstick. What if she does attract people? You know you'd rather spend the rest of your life alone than attract them the way she does. You would, too. Stop looking stricken.

"Why doesn't he come on? Well, he *could* be early.

"What was it he said to call him? Oh, you mustn't, though. Not in public, anyway. It might be all right in private, but not where anyone could hear you."

She leaned nearer to the mirror, and imagined another head beside hers, distinguished, worldly, white-haired, and with a very impressive beard.

"Hello, Nick," she whispered, blushing.

Gary Fargo put aside the crime-action magazine, and the crackle of Tommy-guns died slowly inside his head. Death comes to the arch criminal. As it should, he said hastily to himself. As it should. You can't let them break either legal or moral codes with impunity. Die they must, and like the rats they are.

But—

Yes, but. One taste, one short excursion into that life would compensate for the deadly dullness here. To have a keen, incisive brain—which he felt he had—to make lightning decisions, to protect his men, to . . . to have a moll.

Yes, to have a moll. Someone like . . . like . . . well, like Marlin Stone, dammit. Not to be seen in public with her, of course, but in the night, privately. In the hide-out. One couldn't face one's townspeople after being seen in public with such a one, but one could face these spring twilights with a heady sense of waiting, by the gods!

No, on second thought, no. He was principal of Mulveta's school, a position of responsibility and importance. He was getting something done. He was guiding the young. Some regret was to be expected in renouncing that other, colorful, existence, but in the end it was worth it.

These spring nights, though—

He got to his feet and walked around his study, the length of his stride taxing his short legs. His round eyes touched a stack of papers on his desk and moved away. They were to be read and corrected, for it was important that students in his civics class receive proper guidance, but not now, not now.

Not while twilight lay on the town, and a half moon rode at the zenith. A man had to have something.

He examined himself in the wall mirror. He took off his spectacles, polished them with gleaming linen. He put them back and looked again. He took a little comb from his vest pocket and combed brown hair over his growing bald spot. He put his hat on, adjusted it to a sober angle. He straightened his tie. He examined his fingernails. He went out.

He looked at the moon. He didn't smile at it, he didn't sneer. He just looked. Then he dropped his head and strolled along the street, white-lined with spring blooms.

In the next block was the little cottage with the baby-blue trim where Cynthia lived. Would she see him tonight, hail him from her front door? They could meet at her gate for a few moments of decorous conversation. They never had, but they could. That wouldn't offend the proprieties. Even if the neighbors were watching, that would be all right.

"Cynthia," he thought, "are you going to let your youth rot here? Are you going to let me rot here?"

He stopped. Three doors ahead—from Cynthia's door—an exodus was being made. She was on somebody's arm. This somebody had an air. A man of the world. You could tell by the way he walked that he was the epi-

tome of the exciting male. A little pain touched Gary Fargo's heart as the couple came through her gate and turned toward him.

"I've come to lure you," Old Nick said. "To ply you with wickedness. You've been softened up by now."

Cynthia took her hand from his and frowned slightly. This wasn't the note to be struck—not yet. What did he think she was? What would people say if they could hear? Or if they knew how her heart was hurling blood along her veins? She could feel it in her fingertips, and her temples.

"Won't you sit down?" she said coldly. "May I take your hat and cloak?"

"Won't you get your hat?" he countered. "I don't suppose you'd dare go out without it?"

"Are you—going out?"

His yellow eyes gleamed. "Certainly. You'd be uncomfortable here, when I'd tell you all the things you've missed, all the things you should know. You can listen, and dream, and laugh publicly at ideas you'd shrink from in privacy. Sad, but true."

Miss Elkins blinked. Perhaps it would be better to go out, after all. And, yes, she'd not dare go without a hat.

"Excuse me," she said, and went to put it on.

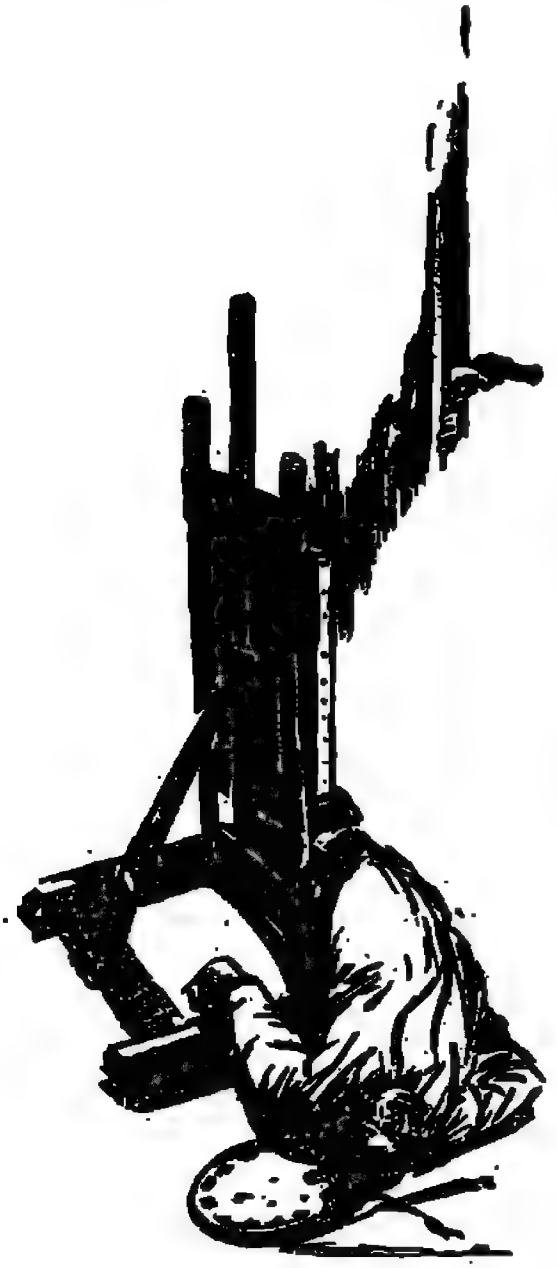
He took her arm as they walked to her gate. The touch of his fingers just above her elbow sent delicious little ripples of sensation clear to her toes. Her eyes, she thought, must be very pretty now.

Why, there was Gary . . . er, Mr. Fargo. How awkward. What would he think? That Mr. Nicholas was an uncle? He didn't look like an uncle, he didn't act like one. No, Mr. Fargo didn't think he was, either. You could tell by that stricken look. Oh, dear, what can you say? You've got to say something.

"Good evening, Mr. Fargo."

The slight bow, the slight tipping of his hat. You could tell what he was thinking, all right. Well, let him think! He symbolized this little dot on the map. Never step out of the straight and narrow.

They walked on. Funny that Mr. Nicholas didn't say anything. She stole a sidewise glance at him. He seemed to be amused, as if he were reading her thoughts.



They walked on toward the interurban line. Miss Elkins didn't nod at the half dozen persons they met as they passed Forbes' confectionery, Riker's drugstore, and Runt's pool hall. They didn't speak to her.

But she looked sharply at a youth who eyed them as he approached along the sidewalk. It was that Roberts boy, and he had a strange expression on his narrow face. Oh, dear, he was going to speak. She couldn't cut him dead.

"How do you do?" he said to both of them.

"Good evening, Billy," she answered. She felt suddenly ashamed. She didn't know why. It was some overtone in his voice. It brought home to her the responsibilities she had accepted when she became a schoolteacher.

Mr. Nicholas didn't speak to the boy. She flicked another sidewise glance, and saw the yellow eyes twinkling at the boy and—yes, at her, too.

Billy spoke directly to her companion. "Bored?" he asked. That was all. He bowed slightly and went on.

Old Nick and Cynthia Elkins went on.

The interurban line came nearer and nearer. It began to loom in her mind like an unwelcome temptation. If that Roberts boy hadn't come along with his sly insinuations. No, they weren't insinuations. They were true. Truth is truth and that's all there is to it. One simply didn't do certain things. Especially with . . with an old rake. Oh, dear! How could she live with herself after this?

She stopped, turned to Old Nick.

"I don't expect you to understand, Mr. Nicholas. But good-by. I must go home. I've got to go home. Good night."

He didn't answer, he didn't bow. She carried with her a small anger at his obvious amusement. Let him laugh! Right was right and wrong was wrong, and there was no compromise. It was all right for him and his kind, who had no sense of responsibility, to flout certain conventions. But those conventions were the basis of right living, and you either conformed or you were not the right kind of person.

And she hadn't intended to flout them in the first place, she told herself. Curiosity had been her motivation. She had wanted to know, so that the knowing would give her a broader grasp of people, a broader understanding.

But you didn't have to go through somethings to know. There were fundamental eternal truths that you knew by instinct. If you had a sense of responsibility, you abided by them.

Oh, there he was. Mr. Fargo had not returned home. He was coming toward her along the path she had so lightly trod a moment before. She slowed her headlong pace. She touched her hair to make sure it was not disarranged. She smoothed the front of her dark-blue dress, and smoothed it over her hips.

"Mr. Fargo," she said with a breathlessness that was not altogether the result of her hurrying, "I'm a little frightened. Will you see me home, please?"

He blinked. His round face began to beam. "With pleasure," he said gravely.

"It won't inconvenience you?" she asked anxiously.

"Not at all, not at *all*."

They strolled along the quiet street. She looked up. There was a moon. She hadn't noticed.

VII.

It was not his father who appeared in Billy's room that night. Even before the creature spoke, Billy knew this. There was not only an alien *feel* to it, but an ominousness. This was an enemy.

"All right," it said harshly, "let's have it."

"Have what?" Billy asked.

"What's your game? You're up to something. So let's have it."

Billy smiled. "Or else?"

"Yes! Or else."

"Did Old Nick send you?"

"Nick!" the creature snorted. "What does he care? He says it doesn't matter in the end, and we can play our games. But this is no game, my bucko. You can't play fast and loose with us and get away with it. You're a serious experiment, and you've got to act like it. Why did you throw those two together again?"

"Who?"

"And don't play dumb! You're not fooling anybody. I know you're almost as smart as Nick himself. Almost. The old maid and the old fool, that's who."

"I didn't throw them together."

"Now look," his visitor said patiently, "I'm not even listening to what you say, because you could probably talk me out of it. I know your tongue's been touched. But I want to know what's going on. If you're pulling a fast one, let me tell you—don't. You won't like what happens."

"What could happen? What could you do?"

"Listen, I'm not a show-off. I didn't come here to bandy tortures with you. I'm asking you one more time, what's up?"

"What could be up?" Billy countered. "I was told I couldn't help doing whatever I do. It's born in me."

"Your old man talks too much. Besides, he's a dreamer. That's why he never advanced any further than he has. You know and I know you can try anything you please. But you can't get away with double-crossing. I'll see to that. Or be damned for it."

"Are you my old man's boss? You're not a dreamer?"

"I didn't get to be supervisor sticking pins in old ladies. I work on a big scale, not with individuals. But I'm gonna work on you, bud. You're important, if you pan out. So that's why I want to know. You did something you weren't supposed to do. Why?"

"Whoever or whatever this creature is," Billy thought, "he talks a lot. Maybe that's all he does. Maybe he won't really do anything."

"I don't have to tell you," he said.

There was a little silence.

Then, from all sides gigantic shapes of terror lunged at him. They could not actually be seen, but, like figures in a nightmare, could be sensed. Billy could neither discern nor divine their real shapes, but he felt a frantic need to escape, to beat them off.

For they gibbered. It wasn't words, but obscene threats drooling from great mouths.

He tried to move and could not. Like the dreamer of a nightmare, he was frozen in his bed. His arms were leaden, his neck rigid. He couldn't even cry out the terror that had him in a cold sweat, that was driving him to madness.

The pressure eased, and he gasped, "I'll tell you!"

The pressure went away, the unseen shapes vanished.

"I hate that sort of thing," his visitor said. "I think it's silly. Impish. Not grown up. But sometimes it's necessary. Now tell."

"The trouble with you," Billy said, "is you can't wait to see what happens. You want everything right now. Listen. What I've done already to Mr. Fargo and Miss Elkins is only the beginning. I'm gonna do lots more to them and some others. But it'll come out all right in the end. You'll see."

"Hm-m-m," his visitor said dubiously. "I don't know what to say. I know you're clever. I ought to, the way your old man bubbles over you. But you could get things in a mess if you wanted to, and what the Auditors would say I don't know. I don't want to know. And I don't feel that I can trust you."

"What could I do? Old Nick is around all the time."

"I told you," his visitor snapped, "that he doesn't care about details. He takes the long view. He didn't try to stop you tonight, did he? No, he thinks it's funny. He thinks everything's funny. No sense of sobriety, that's Nick. All he wants is results, and he

enjoys getting 'em, no matter how long it takes."

"Well, I've told you. If you don't believe me, I can't help it."

"In my business, bud, you don't believe anybody. You should hear some of the stories I get. Some of 'em say, 'Oh, but I don't belong here.. really. There must be a mistake.' And the things they can dream up to make it sound good! Listen, I wouldn't believe Nick himself, on a pile of Pit cinders."

"Then do whatever you want to, and beat it," Billy said. "I got to go to school tomorrow, and I'm sleepy."

Silence fell. It lengthened; and lengthened, and lengthened. There was a troubled sigh, and then Billy knew he was alone.

Had he won? Well, he hadn't been hurt, he hadn't been stopped, he hadn't given out any information. But still—

It was a sense of things to come, unpleasant things, that kept him awake in the dark.

Where would it end? If he could stall long enough, he could straighten out the mess he created as a child, as far as its principals were concerned. But what then? What would they do, or try to do, to him? How could he protect himself against them?

He shivered, thinking of those shapes that lunged at him out of the darkness. All the while it had been happening, he had known it was a trick, but his terror had been tangible almost. It was a terror you could have weighed, or bitten. And that had been off the arm. It wasn't planned, or elaborate. What could they do when they really tried?

But he was going ahead with it until they stopped him. What they had done to him wasn't fair. It was as if they had given him wings and told him not to fly outside his own room. If his every act were to be dictated by Old Nick and his kind, why should he exist at all?

He could be a leader of men, his father had said. Sure, like that goat in the stockyards that led the sheep to the slaughter pen. But who wanted to be a goat? Not all your life, anyway.

He thought of Fred Roth, how Fred had reacted when he confessed that he had turned in the poster under Marlin's name.

"I was just a kid, Fred," he'd said. "And she wanted it. I wanted her to have it. I'm sorry it caused you all this trouble."

The strange fact was that he had been sorry. Fred hadn't gone in much for the simple joys of youth. He'd fallen in with older musicians, and had learned to play like an angel. He'd driven himself toward a sophistication that was as false as it was damaging.

It was only natural that he had gravitated into that bunch at Harry's. They were seeking sensations, too, though their reasons were different. They'd had their day. They were just trying to hang on to it, whereas Fred was trying to create one.

But maybe Fred was straightened out now. What was it he'd said?

"I guess it was yours to give, Bill. You gave me the idea and told me how to do it."

"But *you* painted it, Fred. I didn't do that."

"Yeah. That's right. I'm glad I know that."

"You can paint others, too, Fred. You really got something."

"Maybe. It's more fun than blowing a horn, anyway. Look, Bill. I've had a bad time. I'm sorry about Jerry. I don't know what to do."

"Paint pictures. That's what you want to do. Sure, you're sorry about Jerry. Who isn't? But it's done. So paint."

"Maybe I will. Come over sometime?"

"Sure thing."

Billy thought of that promise with warmth. It would be nice to have a friend—again.

Well, that took care of Fred, it seemed. Leave it alone now, and stall

these midnight visitors when they got curious.

And Miss Elkins and Mr. Fargo were straightened out, too, apparently. Else why this visit tonight from the "supervisor"? Remaining was Dr. Stone. And Marlin?

Funny, his father had never gone into that question. Had Marlin become what she was as a result of his act? But what was she? She was honest, that was sure. It was true that she did not conform to patterns laid down by school authorities, but how could she, cooped up in that big house with Verna and Gloria? That would drive anybody to drink, and worse. But the question was, had she been intended to grow up this way or had she been jolted out of her destined channel by Billy Roberts?

He couldn't say. Of one thing he was certain, though: he would surely like to do something about Marlin. She was all right.

Principal Gary Fargo touched his head to see that his bald spot was covered when his secretary announced that Marlin Stone had answered his summons. He arranged his round face in an expression of disapproval and removed all but a faint spark from his eyes as she sauntered through the door in a blue blouse matching her eyes and setting off honey-colored hair, a jaunty skirt revealing smooth knees, and white, high-heeled shoes.

He repressed his desire to spring up and offer a chair, to touch her bare arm, perhaps, as he helped her into it. As he shifted his eyes from her clear, level gaze, a fleeting memory bothered him. He had been thinking of her only a few days ago, but in what connection? It seemed to him that it had occurred on the night he had met Cynthia and taken her home, but the reason why he had been thinking of Marlin eluded him. Well, it was of no importance.

"Please sit down," he said without expression.

Her full mouth twitched at the corners. "I'll stand."

"As you please." He gathered his thoughts, reviewed in his mind the stormy teachers' meeting of the preceding night. "Miss Stone, as you are possibly aware, we, who are instructors, have a grave responsibility toward our charges."

She said nothing to this. The pause began to be embarrassing, and he hurried on:

"We must instill in them an awareness of their obligations to others and to themselves. It is no small task, I assure you. Youthful spirits are inclined to . . . ah, break over the traces." He smiled apologetically for the slang phrase. "We are inclined to excuse infractions of codes of behavior as long as they do not become habitual, for they bespeak healthy growth. Corrective measures, however, are necessary at times. Do you follow me?"

She smiled tolerantly.

Fargo flushed, continued: "I regret that such an occasion has arisen . . . er, that such an occasion is . . . ah, that is to say, an incident which has been brought to our attention seems to warrant such treatment. But we do not act hastily. We should like to hear your version of the incident. You know, of course, to what I refer. Have you anything to say?"

Marlin twisted her mouth down at one corner and looked at him until his eyes shifted. "You've made up your mind, Mr. Fargo. I heard about your little party last night. How you and your girl friend swung the others in line."

"Miss Stone!"

"All right, how you and Miss Elkins carried the banner. Go ahead and kick me out. Get it over with."

"Our constitution," he said firmly, "grants every person the right to hear and defend himself against charges. That is why you are here. You are charged with smoking on school property. Have you anything to say?"

"Nope."

"You admit it?"

Marlin shrugged. She felt a certain bitter amusement, remembering how she had gone into the girls' locker room and found Lucy Belle Wethers sneaking a smoke. How she had told Lucy Belle, the class' ranking student, that Miss Elkins was close behind. How Lucy Belle had shoved the cigarette at her with an "Oh, deah, do something with it!" And how Miss Elkins had come in and found her. The situation itself was beside the point, of course, if she were to be honest.

"I have smoked on school property, as about ninety percent of my class have. It's no secret, is it, that we students smoke? It couldn't be, or there wouldn't be any rules about it."

"We have seen no evidence," Mr. Fargo said evenly, "that your classmates indulge such habits. We do have evidence in your case. You must admit that such incidents are not examples of good conduct?"

"Look, Mr. Fargo. Will you be honest?"

He made a gesture like a pigeon ruffling its feathers. "I believe," he said haughtily, "that I have such a reputation."

"Do you? Well, then, answer me this. Would it do me any good to defend myself? Really?"

"Miss Stone! Every person has the right to defend himself. Your question reflects to my discredit. It implies that I am not open-minded."

"Well, are you? You and Miss Elkins fought to have me expelled. Then you fought to get you the right to use your own judgment. Hadn't you made up your mind before I got here? Honest?"

"I had not!" he snapped. "I am rapidly coming to a decision, however, as a result of your insinuations."

"Then lay on, MacDuff," she murmured.

"You leave me no alternative, Miss Stone. Once," he said, "you distinguished yourself, and brought nation-wide credit to this school. But that triumph seemed to stultify you. You made no further efforts along artistic lines, and—"

"I'm no artist," she interrupted. "Miss Elkins knew it then. I could tell."

"That is beside the point. Since that time you have broken rule after rule. These infractions have been overlooked because of your fine background—"

"My stepmother's money, you mean."

"Please! We have reached our limit. Unless you take an oath to give up the injurious habit of using tobacco in any form and apply yourself to your studies, I must expel you."

"I won't make any such promise, Mr. Fargo. I don't think it's important, whether I smoke or not. And I think it's my business, not yours. I may not be of age, but I'm old enough to decide certain things for myself."

"Then I must regretfully inform you, Miss Stone, that you are no longer a member of this student body."

Old Nick twinkled across the dining table at Billy and helped himself to scalloped potatoes. "What else could you expect?" he asked. "Medals?"

"But why pick on Marlin?" Billy demanded. "Almost everybody smokes."

"Billy!" Lucille interposed. "You don't?"

"Once in a while. Why?"

"Oh, Billy," she wailed. "You're just a baby."

"You'd better not let me catch you," Jim Roberts said. "You're not old enough yet. When you're eighteen, we'll talk it over."

"All right," Billy said impatiently, "I'll quit. But why pick on her?" he asked Old Nick again.

"You are aware," Old Nick said humorously, "that a new alliance has been . . . well, not consummated, I assure you, but formed. Miss Elkins and Mr. Fargo have converged on each other after several years of moving along separate paths. During those several

years, they developed certain mental habit patterns. They convinced themselves that a certain rigorousness was the laudable and satisfying factor in living. When they formed their spiritual merger, they were strengthened in their rigid appraisal of conduct. Like the dog in the manger, they are prevented by themselves from enjoying certain lapses, and their code becomes the righteous code. Singly, neither of them would have prosecuted the case against Marlin with such fervor. But in their new-found strength, they will wage war to the death against what from their viewpoint is evil. Whose name is Legion."

"But," Billy persisted, "why pick on Marlin?"

"Surely it's simple," Old Nick replied. "Marlin is everything Miss Elkins cannot bring herself to be: honest, beautiful, curious, and courageous. She is everything Mr. Fargo cannot have: excitement, adventure, the prize of conquest. So they ganged up on her. They'll be even stronger in this respect," Old Nick mused, "after their coming emotional . . . uh, union. It won't be very satisfactory to either."

Once again, Billy thought, he had played into Old Nick's hands. The future actions of Elkins-Fargo would bring results gratifying to Nick. You could tell that by the pleasure in his voice. Was it going to be thus, always?

VIII.

Gerald Folsom, Sr., posted another entry to customers' accounts, and glanced at the clock. Three minutes to five. He put one elbow on his desk, spread his hand horizontally and laid his mild gray face in it.

Jerry, he thought. Jerry used to drop in around this time and walk home with him. While he finished the tag end of the day's work, Jerry would loaf out in the main office and kid around with Miss Holman. Jerry wasn't ashamed that his old man was merely a bookkeeper for the department of water and power. Jerry wasn't ashamed to appear on the street with him, though he was gray and a little stooped after fifteen years of bending over rows of figures.

Jerry had a great future. Had. That account at the bank, that special account, had three thousand four hundred eighteen dollars and twenty-six cents in it, not counting accrued interest falling due next week. It would have sent Jerry to college.

Jerry's future would have been his, too. His and Martha's. They would have watched him become the school basketball star, president of his class, editor of the school paper. They had discussed it, even before he was born, had planned it in detail. They had both worked toward one end, making their son a success.

All for nothing. All the years of skimping, doing without new clothes, using old furniture long past its day, not going to shows because of the cost—wasted. Washed out in one little moment of violence.

For six weeks now, they had sat silent at night, listening. Not that they expected to hear him come whistling up the walk, to burst in the front door, toss his cap on the couch and demand something to eat. No, he was dead and buried. They knew he wouldn't come back. But they sat listening.

There was nothing to talk about. They had been in the habit of totting up expenses, paring where they could, deciding how much they could put in the special account next week. Sometimes it would come to only fifty cents, but once it was as much as eight dollars less a few pennies. They thought of that one magnificent week when everything broke right as the time they put in almost eight dollars. Not as more than seven. It seemed larger the other way, and that meant more comfort for Jerry in the end.

A stark realization of finality came to him as he sat with his face in his out-

spread hand. His life was over, too. His and Martha's. They had nothing to talk about any more, except the past; and the past was too painful to consider.

No, they couldn't talk about the exciting day, when they were already middle-aged, when they knew he was coming. They couldn't talk about the plans they'd made, or how he'd got hilariously drunk the day Jerry was born and brought home a complete football outfit. Or how he'd sheepishly returned it the next day and got his money back so they could buy him a crib.

They couldn't talk about it, because it didn't mean anything any more. Jerry was gone. And they couldn't tell each other again that he was a smart kid and popular, too.

They couldn't talk about the future, because it was just bending over this desk, shielding his eyes with a green eyeshade, posting entries, making out bills, sending second notices. Ten years of it to come. Then, retirement. For what? They'd planned that Jerry would have been self-supporting by then, perhaps married to a nice girl, and they could sit on the front porch for the rest of their lives waiting for the mailman to bring them news from their "children." And perhaps grandchildren, before they died.

The five o'clock whistle blew, and Gerald Folsom, Sr., straightened. With automatic motions, he closed his ledgers, tidied his desk, removed the eyeshade, shucked into his shiny coat, and put on his hat. These acts did not register on his conscious mind, for he was thinking of what he was going to do.

It wasn't fair that he and Martha should have all the suffering. He had decided that on the day of the coroner's inquest. But the inquest itself had given him nothing. Not a name, not a hint.

Afterward, he had learned the true nature of Harry's Roadside Tavern, but by then it was closed and Harry was gone. He had debated a few days on whether to quit his job and run Harry to earth and kill him, but he wouldn't have known how to go about it. Besides, that wouldn't bring any suffering to anybody. It was doubtful

if Harry's parents were still living, more doubtful that they would sit around their living room, empty, if Harry should die.

Then, a whisper here, a hint there, and he had built the picture of the incident. Freddie Roth. He had parents. He had been in the center of things when it happened. Little Freddie, but not too little to bring suffering and death.

Justice was all Gerald Folsom, Sr., wanted. And there was no justice in a situation where only he and Martha sat night after night, listening. Surely no man could call that justice.

He muttered grave good-evenings at his fellow workers and went out into the street. He walked woodenly, with his slight shuffle, shoulders stooped, to Pete Worley's hardware store.

Pete's weather-bitten face sobered as he saw the old man enter. Damn it, how could you tell the nice little guy you were sorry his son got killed in a speak? Maybe if you just kept still you wouldn't have to say anything. You could just wait on him. You could quit twisting your hands, too, you big ox.

"I . . . I would like to buy a gun," Mr. Folsom said hesitantly.

"Goin' huntin'?" Pete asked jovially.

"Why . . . why, yes."

"Got just the thing for you, then. Now you take this—" He took a double-barreled shotgun from a rack, handling it as if it were a pretty girl. "It shoots where you point it. Parker. Very good make. Full choke left, half choke right barrel. Knock a rabbit off at a hundred yards."

"Why . . . I, uh, had something smaller in mind."

Pete looked over his display. "Well, here's a Remington sixteen, repeater. Can't go wrong on it."

"No, I mean . . . a little gun, a pistol."

"Can't do much huntin' with a pistol. Rats, maybe."

"Yes," Mr. Folsom said.

"Well, then! Here's the thing. Twenty-two target. Eight shot. Feel that balance." Mr. Folsom took the gun gingerly and, after some fumbling, hefted it. Pete waxed enthusiastic. "Sweet little gun, that. Point it like your finger. Hair trigger. Shoot the knobs off a horny toad at twenty paces."

Mr. Folsom pointed the gun at the wall, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. He opened his eyes, gazed through his spectacles with disappointment.

"Nothing happens."

"Oh, you got to cock it. It's single action. Pull back the hammer. No, here. Lemme show you."

Pete demonstrated. Mr. Folsom tried it.

"I'll take it. Will you load it?"

"Sure. How many shells you want?"

"Just what the gun holds."

Pete frowned. "You can't do much shootin' with eight shells. Besides, I can't break a box."

"I'll pay for the box," Mr. Folsom said mildly. "But I want only enough to fill the gun."

"O. K.," Pete said, shrugging.

"You sure get some funny ones," Pete thought, as he watched Mr. Folsom shuffle away with the gun in his pocket. "If the little guy isn't careful, he'll fool around and shoot off one of his toes."

Mr. Folsom, in his wooden fashion, walked up Main to Elm and turned toward Roth's. It was fitting that he had drawn a check on the special account to pay for this. He had invested part of Jerry's future in evening the score.

Somehow, that fact seemed to impart poetic justice to what he was going to do.

When he had come to the wooden swinging gate in the Roths' picket fence, he stood quietly for a moment and eyed the two-story house. It was somewhat larger than his own, but not enough to matter. Mr. and Mrs. Roth would be no more lonely than he and Martha.

That was all he wanted—to even up matters. He assured himself again on this point. His was not a mission of revenge, for he knew that vengeance was not his. *Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.* He had read it many times. But it didn't say anything about justice, or balancing accounts.

He opened the gate.

As he did so, he detected movement in the barn, out back by the Bellefleur apple tree. He had eaten those apples, a little flash of memory told him; Mrs. Roth had given Jerry a basketful once, and Martha had made apple dumplings. While he recalled the incident, his eyes fixed on the loft window and identified the source of the movement. It was Fred.

"This way is better," he thought as he skirted the house and shuffled toward the barn. "No need to ask where Fred is. The shock will be greater if they just find him without any warning." That was the way it had been in Jerry's case. No warning. This was the way of justice.

When he put a foot on the bottom step of the staircase mounting to the loft, Fred called out from above:

"That you, Billy? You'll have to hurry, while there's still light enough. What took you so long?"

Mr. Folsom went up. When his head projected above the loft floor level, he saw Fred standing at an easel before the big north window, brush in one hand, palette on the other arm. Fred didn't turn until Mr. Folsom was clear of the stairs.

Then, "See what you think of—" Fred began. He identified his visitor. "Why, Mr. Folsom," he said, puzzled.

Mr. Folsom said nothing. He moved nearer, put his hand on the gun that sagged his coat pocket, and concentrated on what he must do. Pull the hammer back until it clicks. That's it. Now take out the gun and point it like a finger.

"What you doing?" Fred cried, fear and bewilderment in his voice. "Don't do that? Don't—"

Mr. Folsom pulled the trigger. Fred clapped a hand to his chest. His dark, intense face went slack with astonishment.

"You—shot *me*!" he said in a voice of wonder.

Mr. Folsom pulled back the hammer again, pulled the trigger again. This time, Fred jerked as the bullet hit, and fell to the floor. He lay there moaning, twisting in agony, and Mr. Folsom returned the gun to his pocket.

Mr. Folsom began to mutter a little monologue. It had no words, it was just sound. There was something tender in it, like the gurgling of a baby. He retraced his way carefully down the stairs and went away, crooning his meaningless monologue softly to himself.

Billy Roberts walked the few blocks to Fred Roth's deep in thought. How much time did he have before Old Nick would crack down? How long could he stall his father and the "supervisor"? Now that Fred had begun in earnest to paint, he expected action, for they were watchful.

As he cut across a back yard along boyhood ways to the Roth barn, he saw a stooped little man going away. Mr. Folsom. What was he doing here?

A sudden premonition sent Billy over the Roths' back fence without touching it. He streaked in full flight to the barn and burst up the stairway.

Fred's face was covered with blood from a crease along the side of his head. Blood oozed between fingers clamped against his stomach. He was unconscious, but alive.

Billy ran to the house, found the telephone, and had Marlin on the phone when Mrs. Roth came to investigate the commotion. Her kindly face was puzzled and questioning but when Billy waved her to silence she stood quietly, waiting.

"Is your father home?" Billy snapped into the telephone. He listened, interrupted. "He can't go out. Keep him

there. . . . I don't care if he's supposed to have dinner with the President. . . . You stop him. Tell him to get ready for an operation. . . . Fred Roth. . . . I'll get a hearse from Collins."

He hung up, called the Collins Mortuary.

"What . . . Fred?" Mrs. Roth asked incoherently. "What happened? Where's my boy?"

"He's bleeding to death in the barn," Billy said brutally.

Mrs. Roth promptly fainted. That was good. She wouldn't clutter up the—

"Collins Mortuary," a soft voice purled into the receiver. It was hopefully mournful, and you could hear in it the rubbing together of sad, black gloves.

"I know you haven't got an ambulance," Billy said, "so send a hearse with a stretcher over to Fred Roth's. Hurry! He's bleeding internally."

"But we do not—" the voice began regretfully.

"I know it isn't good business for you," Billy cut in, "but you can save a boy's life if you step on it. And if you don't, how much business do you think you'll get from this town afterward?"

"We're on our way," the voice said briskly. "Roth's? Two minutes."

Billy took a quick look at Mrs. Roth. She was coming to, but maybe she'd be out for another two or three minutes and not be in the way. He ran out to the front fence and, not caring if anyone was watching, tore out a section large enough to let the hearse through.

It came screaming up Elm, the voice of succor in the trappings of death, and he motioned it through the gap to the barn. As it hurtled through, he leaped on the running board. He had the stretcher out and halfway up the stairs before the somber car had come to a complete stop. The driver came flying after him.

Gloria Byington thought:

"Gosh, he's cute. You'd think he might be a college man. He does the same things to you when he talks. But really super. Not at all like those *boys* that Miss Petty imports for dances. Will he still be downstairs when I finish dressing?"

She examined herself in the mirror. "Well," she thought, "you really are sort of lanky, but you're not a complete waste. Your skin is clear, and your eyes are pretty. Better wear a scarf over that scar on your throat. Yes, it's exciting, and several boys have wanted to kiss it, but it's best not to distract him tonight. He has a lot on his mind.

"Marlin would be simply furious if you took him away from her. She can pretend all she likes, but she's interested in him. So are lots of other girls. Woman hater, is he? Men have been cured of that before, mother says.

"A red scarf. It's better with straight black hair. There. That does something for you. You look well in green and red.

"Mother says men are simple. You just have to do something nice for them, and they follow you around. She's going to be angry at Dr. Stone, though. She doesn't like to see an opera alone.

"But who could have resisted him? I wanted to do the operation myself, when he got through talking. So did Marlin, I could see. How exciting he is. And how clever. He got Fred up here in eight minutes, he said.

"You can bet Dr. Stone will save him. He just has to, after the way Billy talked.

"Will I be popular! The Junior Auxiliary of the Mulveta Browning Circle won't read much Browning tonight. A shooting, an emergency operation. They'll hang on my story. They always do, of course. It's nice to be envied. It's nice to own a bank. Well, it will be mine when I come into my money.

"That would be a good career for Billy. I must speak to Mr. Andrews.

"Now, you look all right, and you don't have much time. You've got to stop and say hello to him. The black fur, I think. It makes your hair shine. Here we go, then, ready or not."

"How is he?" she asked Billy, who was sitting on the edge of the divan in the downstairs living room.

"I don't know. They're still in there," he replied, running his eyes over her in a quick, appreciative appraisal.

"Did the nurse come?"

"Yes. Marlin's cleaning up, I guess. She helped Dr. Stone until the nurse got here."

"Who shot him, Mr. . . . er, Billy?"

"Mr. Folsom, I guess. I just talked to the constable on the phone. They picked him up with a gun on him. He was mad. He went out of his mind."

"Quietly, no doubt," Marlin said from the doorway. She came into the room, pale, strained. "The way he always has done everything." She examined Gloria. "My! The plush horse. Very fancy, friend."

"Thank you," Gloria said frostily. "Where are you going to spend the night tonight, Marlin?"

Marlin grinned. "I'm going to spend the night with a man, dear."

"How's Fred?" Billy interjected.

"You can tell the papers," Marlin said, "that our brilliant local physician and surgeon, Dr. George Stone, extracted the slug. It was lodged in his spinal column. He's going to be all right. Yep, Dr. Stone came through again. If Mrs. Roth keeps out of his hair, he'll finish up nicely. One thing," Marlin added, "Dr. Stone is now married, and so is Mrs. Roth. There won't be another mistake along *that* line."

"I resent that," Gloria said.

Marlin looked at her. "Me, too, kid."

Gloria consulted her jeweled watch. "I must run. Shall I leave the light on for you, Marlin, when I come in?"

"Why waste the electricity?"

"Very well. Good night, Billy."

"So long," Billy said.

When Gloria was gone, Marlin looked solemnly at him. "Billy, I—" She paused. "Well, it was swell of you to talk daddy into it. I didn't like what I had to do in there, especially after Mrs. Roth came and saw all the blood, but I liked what it did to daddy. It made him a man again. Thanks."

Billy rose. "I hope it lasts. If everything's O. K. now, I better be going. You wouldn't like to go to a show, would you?"

"Yes, very much. But I've got to sit up all night with Freddie. The nurse has to go back to the hospital as soon as he's out of danger. Tomorrow, maybe?"

"That'll be swell, Marlin."

IX.

What was it his father had said?

He couldn't quote it exactly, but it was something like: "The girl—Marlin—will be constantly reminded of her defalcation, and be driven into our arms."

It came back to him, sitting beside Marlin in the theater. While Rod la Roque and Vilma Banky progressed harriedly along separate paths to that inevitable meeting of lips, arms, and bodies on the screen, it came back to him.

Marlin had been marked down as their quarry, then. If he were to thwart them, he had better begin.

Why, he asked himself, why this burning necessity to block them? Was it strictly to declare his independence, or was it because—

No, not that. He didn't care anything about people. Or did he? There was Fred, for example. He liked Fred. He was honestly glad that Fred was going to pull through all right. He liked the way Dr. Stone had reacted: with a friendly hopefulness that Billy knew what he was talking about, that his faith was justified. He liked the way Gloria had looked at him last night. He liked the shy, knowing smiles Miss Elkins gave him in the halls at school.

Was that it? Was his human herit-

age so strong that he could not let that other side dominate?

He didn't know. He knew only that he must do what he must do. He knew that he liked Marlin's hand in his here in the darkness.

He knew that he didn't want them to get Marlin. As far as the others were concerned—Miss Elkins, Mr. Fargo, Fred, Dr. Stone—it was more a matter of principle. This was personal. In this shadow stirring of desire, it was suddenly important that Marlin be put beyond their reach.

Why was it, he wondered, that he was inarticulate with Marlin? Why didn't the right phrase leap instinctively to his lips? He could talk to others. Witness that impassioned plea to Dr. Stone yesterday. But with Marlin he didn't know quite what to say, quite what to do with his hands.

His tongue had been touched, his father had said. But were there circumstances where that fact was of no avail? Did that other person his father had mentioned, whose tongue also had been touched, have trouble in talking to girls? Or to a girl, a special girl?

He could talk others into doing what he wished. He knew this, felt it. But when it came to something he really

wanted, he didn't know what to say. Was this new power so valuable, then, if it didn't work all the way? Was that the kind of gifts they made, glittering on the surface, but mud deep inside?

If so, here was another reason for defiance. If their favors were useless in the final clutch, they were poor things. Why swear allegiance for shoddy rewards?

For the first time, Billy began to believe that trickery had been employed. Certainly the facts seemed to bear out this theory. They had provided him with a trouble-making heritage, and he could not use it for his own amusement. He had played into their hands until a few weeks ago when he had gone to Elton for Fred, and even on that occasion results had been partly what they desired. Those musicians had gone out, his father said, missionaries of madness, and would make converts all over the world. He could not imagine their ultimate effect; he could only guess.

He had not intended that. He had wanted to restore Fred. But it seemed that his intentions had little to do with effect. This was a matter for resentment.

He was like a play. He began to see this now. He was being tried out in the sticks. If he made a hit, he would open on the Broadway of Old Nick's activities. If the run there were successful, road shows would be formed—others like himself—and sent all over the world.

But if he should flop? What then?

Where was the Cain's warehouse in the realm of devil's drama? The sets and props of a "turkey" wound up in Cain's warehouse. But he was sets, props, and actors in this play. Would a part of him be sent off to some storehouse, and the rest—the actors—dismissed?

But how could he fail?

He had had a glimmering of successful failure in the "supervisor's" reaction to his exhorting Fred Roth to paint again. Apparently the supervisor could not conceive that he would deliberately fight his heritage. They—the "supervisor," his father, the others—regarded their own conduct as a matter of course. They regarded him, Billy, as one of their own. And so, he must carry on the program of confusion as a result of heritable characteristics. That was the path of failure—deceit.

He didn't know the film had ended until Marlin removed her hand and the lights went up. She looked at him mistily as patrons began to file out.

"I'm a sucker for these things," she said. "Did you like it?"

"Sure. That what's-her-name is pretty."

"Oh, do you think so?"

Her slight coolness angered Billy. There it was. He'd said the wrong thing, not struck exactly the right note. Why? Surely it was an inoffensive remark? He wouldn't have made it, though, to anyone else. To Gloria, for example. He'd have said just the right word automatically, and she'd have glowed. She wouldn't have drawn away, as Marlin had. His tongue was touched, indeed. It was tied, where Marlin was concerned.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Whatever you want to."

"Do you want a soda, or something?"

"Why not?"

Her indifference told him that he had failed again. But what should he have suggested? What did she want? A walk in the moonlight? Stronger fare than a soda? If that were it, he'd have nothing to do with it. He didn't know why, exactly. But he knew that he didn't want to contribute to Marlin's reputation as . . . as, well, face it, as one who was "fast." The reason for this escaped him, too.

As they passed Runt's pool hall, he knew that he could go into the back rooms and get a bottle of gin, for Runt catered to the high-school crowd. But not for Marlin.

The Sweet Shop was crowded, as usual after a show, with noisy groups of boys and girls chattering about the movie, about coming events, teachers, dates. A trio of boys in flapping corduroy circulated among the tables, now and then pinching a girl who squealed with mock terror. Three girls whispered to each other about those present.

When Billy and Marlin entered, an absolute hush fell for a few seconds. All present regarded the unprecedented appearance of Billy Roberts in public with a girl.

He saw their eyes, and suddenly knew why he would not get a bottle of gin for Marlin. Into the eyes of the girls came a sort of sympathy for him; the boys eyed him with a knowing envy. They didn't like Marlin.

She was different. She had been expelled from school. Though she had been reinstated a few days later, and though her "crime" was shared by the majority of those present, she was different. Not only because of her expulsion, Billy knew, but because she had broken codes of conditioned behavior when she felt like it, and had regarded such infractions as unworthy of comment.

It was not active dislike. It was resentment, perhaps unconscious, at her because she was not of the pack. She walked her own way alone.

Billy wanted her to be liked. That was the simple fact. And that was the reason why he would not be a party to furthering her isolation. Along that path lay the excesses his father had mentioned. That path led to Old Nick.

Yet it was more than that. He wanted her to be liked for herself, because he liked her.

A buzz of whispers became normal gabble again as Billy and Marlin found vacant stools at the counter and ordered. Marlin took a pack of cigarettes from her gay purse.

"Don't smoke," Billy said quietly.

She turned astonished blue eyes on him. "Why not?"

"Just—because. Please."

"Don't be a sil," she said. "Have one?"

"No. And you're not, either."

"Who do you think you are, anyway? I will so have one."

She did. Billy stared miserably at the soda jerk who assembled their orders with deft acrobatics. He did not look up when the trio in flapping cords called at him in tones of implied obscenity:

"Hey, Bill! Hot stuff, huh?"

For the remark was not made to him; it was made to those present. He was alien. If he had been one of them, they would have called him aside and whispered the remark, added suggestive comment.

He felt very much alone. He hadn't known before this desire to be accepted. What was happening to him? he asked himself fiercely. Where was that glib contempt of people? How was he changing?

"We might as well go," Marlin said, "before you bust out crying."

"O. K.," he snarled. "I'll take you home."

"If it's too much trouble, you needn't bother."

"I need the exercise, anyway. Come on."

On the street they ran into Old Nick. Billy glared at the jaunty figure, started to push on by without speaking. Nick blocked the way, doffed his rakish hat to Marlin.

"How you've developed, my dear," he said pointedly.

"What do you want?" Billy growled.

"Oh, I'm on the prowl. Looking for victims. Speaking of which—" His yellow eyes caressed Marlin—slowly.

She looked up at him with calm amusement. "Sorry," she said. "I wouldn't be interested."

"A pity," Nick murmured.

"You might try inside," she suggested. "Lots of fresh young stuff there."

"Thank you. I may. Let me warn you, though, about Master Billy. He

has ideas of his own. They may be"—he paused, twinkled at Billy—"dangerous."

"I can handle him," Marlin said.

Billy looked sullenly at Old Nick. "Can you?" he asked. "Can you handle me?"

"I?" Old Nick said mildly. He turned to Marlin. "He's in a bad humor. What's the matter with him?"

"I think he's ashamed to be seen in public with me. He tried to preach, inside."

"Ah?" Old Nick's eyebrows raised. He tipped his hat again. "Good night."

Billy maintained a furious silence as they started up the hill. He hadn't handled himself well in that encounter. He had practically declared his intentions, and had aroused no reaction to guide him. Old Nick had merely been amused. As usual. If he would only fight back—

A tiny chill touched Billy's spine. That very objectivity which Old Nick maintained was a little frightening. It gave you no hint. You couldn't tell what Old Nick thought, or what he might do. This was dangerous ground.

"Are you bored?" Marlin asked. There was no resentment in the question. It implied that she didn't really care.

"No, I'm not bored," he said crisply.

She didn't reply. They strolled along the moonlit road between whispering trees. The lazy breeze carried the damp odor of fresh blooms and the eternal query of a far-off owl. Something scurried away from the crunch of their feet.

"Listen," Billy said presently, and there was no rancor in his voice now. "I wish you'd snap out of it."

"Out of what?"

"Oh, these things you do that people don't like. I want you to be—well, good."

"My goodness," Marlin murmured in astonishment. "I'm not hurting anybody. What's eating you?"

"Nothing. Nothing, I guess. Skip it."

"No, I want to know. All I do is have fun. I do what I want when I want to. I don't lie to people, I don't gossip, I don't tell tales out of school. Is that bad?"

"Well," Billy fumbled, "you drink, you smoke—"

"And go out with the boys? I don't see anything wrong in that, as long as I don't hurt somebody else. Do you?"

"Well, people talk."

"But they're people like Gloria. She'll bar somebody from her club because she was born on the wrong side of the tracks, she'll gossip about others, she'll tell lies. That doesn't hurt me as long as I like myself, does it?"

"Well, it seems to. Look at those girls in the Sweet Shop. They hardly spoke to you."

"They're just jealous, Billy. They do the same things I do, but they don't come out in the open. They're afraid to, and they turn against anybody that does."

Billy was out of his depth. He had felt like a small boy all evening, he thought angrily.

"All right, skip it. Well, here we are." They stood at Marlin's gate. A little expectant silence fell. Billy twisted his hands. "Can I . . . would you . . . that is—"

She cut into his floundering. "I think I'd like to kiss you good night, Billy. You're sweet, in a funny sort of way."

He went home in a glow of pleasure that was dampened with doubts, fears, and misgivings. These were crystallized somewhat by his midnight caller.

"My son," his father said, "I am here more in sorrow than in anger. I am afraid that I don't understand you."

"You and me, too," Billy thought.

"I informed you recently, my son, of certain, ah, criticisms. These have increased sharply. Naturally, I upheld you. I counseled patience. I was overruled. But I secured an extension. Be-

fore corrective measures are applied, you may declare your intentions and explain your conduct."

Billy pretended weariness. "What have I done now?" Beneath the pretense, however, was wariness. Maybe he would get a clue, a signpost.

"Only one of your actions is specifically criticized. This is your saving of the boy, Fred Roth."

Billy was startled. "But I couldn't just let him lie there and bleed to death."

"And why not?"

Billy was stunned by the tone. It was not cold-blooded, callous, or heartless. It was just mildly curious.

"Why . . . why," he stammered, "it wouldn't be right."

"And why not?"

"Whadda you mean, 'and why not'?"

"I mean that he was ready for us, my son. You had prepared him, made him ready. Then, with a touch of genius, you had shown him vistas of pleasure. He had glimpsed that goal again for which he was originally bound. Then, before he had entered the path to it, he was shot—a further consequence of your original act. He would have died. He would have been ours. But you snatched him away from us. Why?"

Billy was helpless to answer for a moment because he was trying to adjust his perspective to his father's. Was he expected to have stood by without emotion and watch Fred die? Fred, who had asked him to come over? Fred, who was a good guy? Apparently he was. His father seemed to regard it as the natural thing to do. Protestations of humanitarian impulses would not impress this creature, because he couldn't grasp them. He could grasp cunning, however.

"Well?" his father asked.

Billy still was silent. He recalled the emotions he had experienced in Blackie's. He had hated man, wished him slow tortures, wished that human hope would die slowly, painfully. That was something his father could understand.

"Look," Billy said finally. "When this thing first started, the only people involved were Miss Elkins, Mr. Fargo, Fred, Dr. Stone. Right?"

"That is correct."

"All right. They got jolted out of the thing intended for them by the Others you talked about. Well, I've got 'em all back on the first road again. Well, wouldn't it be a lot more fun to jolt 'em out of it again just when they get really going on something they like? Wouldn't the effect be greater on the world in the end?"

His father was silent for a moment, then vented his strange, dry cackle.

"Then I was right. I knew, my son, that I could depend on you. I knew that you would not show filial ingratitude, after all I've done for you. Oh, you're a chip off the old block, all right. Now I'll have something to tell them! Will they hang their horns in shame! Thank you, my son. You've made a worried father very happy. You're damned with the worst of us; I'm proud of you."

His father disappeared, and Billy lay excitedly in the dark. The proposal he had made was a humming in his veins, and he wondered if it wouldn't be pleasant, after all.

X.

Billy knew that the supervisor would come again. As weeks blended into months and his new philosophy developed, he knew that it was inevitable. His attitude wasn't right.

Dr. Stone walked erect and briskly these days, and did his trick in the Elton Hospital surgery; Miss Elkins and Mr. Fargo went around in a kind of roseate glow; and Fred Roth made plans to attend a Chicago art institute after graduation. Billy observed all this with fond, paternal eyes.

They deserved their chance. That was his new philosophy.

It developed when his schoolmates showed themselves as shyly eager to accept him as he was to be accepted. That careless slap on the shoulder, that

"Hiya, Bill," those pleasant feminine smiles which he received these days brought a warmth, a sense of belonging which was as strange as it was gratifying. He liked people.

He saw them as fundamentally friendly. If you gave them a chance, they'd go out of their way to be nice. If you didn't hold them off in contempt, they came to you with smiles, with invitations, with camaraderie.

And he, who had been lonely to a degree they couldn't grasp, became whole, became human. There were parties, there were dances, there were picnics. A whole new world of adolescent activity opened before him, and if he wallowed a little in it he felt that it was only to be expected. He had remained aloof for so long.

And Marlin. Not that she had changed her attitude or her activities. But it was a common sight now to see Billy and Marlin together—at parties, at dances, walking home from school. Because of this, her excesses were fewer, he told himself. He felt excited inside when he thought of Marlin. The way she looked at him, the way she spoke.

He came finally to the conclusion that foisting him or others like him on these essentially just and fair beings was unforgivable. Besides, acting in the interests of evil—evil from the human standpoint, not Old Nick's—was a lonesome job. Regardless of where he got it, Billy Roberts had the desire to be liked, accepted.

But reprisals must come. The supervisor hewed to the line.

They were longer in coming than he anticipated, with the result that he lay awake at midnight night after night and lost a great deal of sleep. The expectant waiting wore him down. Perhaps this was by design, he thought, when finally he felt a presence. He was tired, irritable and defiant because of the waiting. His judgment might be warped.

"This is no game, bud," the supervisor said bluntly. "We don't like the way you're carrying on. We want to know what goes."

"You can go to hell," Billy snapped.

"Where else?" the supervisor asked, puzzled. "What has that got to do with it?"

Billy welcomed the confusion. He had flared up too quickly. That was not the way. Relax. Wait.

"Nothing, I guess," he answered. "What's wrong now?"

"Why don't you get a cross?" There was venom in the supervisor's snarl. "Why don't you hire a church? You're acting like a holy fool!"

"Why don't you give me a chance?" Billy retorted. "I'm not ready yet."

"You muffed one chance, bud. Look at Fred Roth. He's healthy as a hog and ready for art. If he isn't stopped, he'll get at it one of these days and we'll lose him. You ought to hear the Others rejoice when we lose one. It's sickening. And look at Dr. Stone. He sleeps with a scalpel these days. And the fool

teachers. They fairly drip love and good-fellowship. And Marlin Stone. She hasn't been on a decent drunk in two months. What are you trying to do?"

"I've already said what I was trying to do," Billy replied stoutly. "You know about it."

The supervisor made a sound of disgust. *"Agh!* Your old man! You could wind him around your little finger. I'm tired of getting set up for these dopes—for nothing. I've prepared for Fred Roth twice. But you had to give Dr. Stone a pep talk that kept his knife from slipping. Now give out, and give out straight, bud."

"Would you believe me, whatever I say?"

"Certainly not. But I'd like to hear it."

"Then nuts to you. What are you going to do about it?"

The supervisor said, "O. K., boys."

This time there were no unseen shapes. He could see them this time. First, there was a squad of busy little "things." They gagged him and trussed him.

They weren't very gentle.

These went away, leaving behind a memory of teeth and white eyes. They were replaced by something that Billy refused to picture to himself. Even though he looked at it, its shape and form failed to register on his mind. It was alien. It conformed to no rules of form or shape that he knew. His mind rejected it in a revulsion of unknowing.

It made sounds.

His brain refused to record these sounds; they were so far beyond the bounds of experience. He could never recall them to mind, later. They remained a blankness of—not loathing, or terror, but something of both.

It went to work on him.

He remembered that. He was meant to remember. The things it used for tactile exploration—not hands; things—reached down inside his body, trailing a foulness, a filth. There were pains, but these were not designed to reduce him to abject agreement. They were sharp and hard to bear, but were as nothing to his knowing what was being done to him.

He rejected that, too. The censor of his sanity threw a block between knowledge and consciousness, but memory leaked through. It was unformed, vague around the edges, but nauseating to an unimaginable degree.

After a hundred centuries of unbearable disgust, the thing withdrew, went away. Billy hated himself. He cried a little in the darkness. Hot tears of self-loathing dribbled down onto his pillow. He couldn't move, he couldn't speak, but he could hate.

"Let that be a sample to you," the supervisor said. "There's plenty more where that came from. Let me tell you something, bud. You're going to come through. There's no 'or else' about it. You're important to the future of futility, and you're going to pan out. Your old man hadn't had an idea for centuries, but when he dreamed you up he was really dreaming with brimstone. Now look, bud."

The supervisor's tone changed. It took on a note of cajolery. Billy had to listen. He was helpless in the darkness.

"Think what it means, bud. One of the reasons we get so many is that human beings are unbalanced. They haven't got perfect perspective. There's some cruelty in 'em, and they'll do something—even as trivial as giving out a wrong phone number—which causes a shift in somebody's life. That sort of thing can mean more damned than you can shake a fork at. But look what you got. You got awareness. And you got power. Listen, you can make yourself anything you like. You haven't got the power of life or death over 'em, but you got the power of after-life. Don't that make you want to stand up and cheer? Honest, bud, you don't know what you're missing. Listen."

Another wave of self-loathing swept

over Billy, and he couldn't shudder. This was the most painful experience of all; he was bound in such a fashion that a shudder was impossible. But he listened.

"I was a host in seventeenth-century England, bud. All I ever did was to smother the rich guests of my inn—Sign of the Unicorn, it was called—and rob 'em. I was smart, sure. I took their corpses miles away and left 'em. Nobody ever caught on. Nobody but the one who cut my throat, that is. But what I mean is this. When I became a demon, first grade, I saw what I could have done if I had known some of the things I do now. And you know 'em. Bud, you can do more good than any demon-to-be that ever lived. And you just stand around, watching.

"I'm telling you, bud, you'll never get this opportunity again. One of these days you'll kick off and be like the rest of us, just taking advantage of those imperfections in human beings. Now I'll admit that you've done good work. One of these days there's going to be a mess as a result of it. People will get caught up on the wave of frenzy you started right here in this little hole, and every country in the world will feel the effect. But you're slackening. You're not doing as much as you can.

"Believe me, bud, I don't like to do what I've just done to you. But you need a lesson. And I'm not playing. If you don't snap out of it and accomplish some of the good you're able to accomplish, you'll regret it. Just some of it, that's all I ask now. You're young yet. When you get right in there pitching—no pun intended—you'll be able to make the Others look at their hole card."

The monologue ended. Billy was alone. Alone and bound in such a fashion that not even a muscle could be moved. He couldn't even blink his eyes. His lungs could expand and contract in breathing, but all the rest of his body was rigidly immobile. He had a moment of panic. Was he to be left here helpless, forever?

He tried to picture results in that case. Jim Roberts and his mother would come in tomorrow morning after they decided something was wrong. And they would be helpless. All they could do would be to stand and look. They couldn't untie bonds they couldn't see—he was sure the bonds that held him were invisible—and they couldn't loose an invisible gag. He would be, to all intents and purposes, hopelessly paralyzed.

Suppose it went on and on. He would die, eventually, from lack of food. He thought of steaks. His mouth could water, all right. That part of him wasn't paralyzed.

There was a kind of *"phut."* The supervisor was back.

"All right, boys," he said. To Billy, he went on apologetically: "I forgot you, bud. I didn't mean to leave you like this."

The busy little things loosed him. They went away. The supervisor went away.

At breakfast, Billy looked at his mother with new eyes. Was it from her that he received this stubbornness that overrode his desire to proceed along lines outlined by his father and the supervisor? She was mild, she was pretty. She ran the house with a minimum of effort. He decided that he didn't know much about this Lucille Roberts who had borne him.

He had been too engrossed with his own problem to pay much attention to Jim or Lucille. He had had no occasion to call upon them for assistance—they could have given none, anyway. He had eaten with them, slept in the same house with them, for nearly seventeen years. About all he knew was that Jim liked to spend quiet evenings at home reading or listening to the new radio which had vacuum tubes instead of a crystal, and that Lucille was on tap when needed.

She mended his socks and shirts. She

saw to it that he was clean and fed. She was quietly insistent on both points.

Maybe that was where he got it, this strength had upheld him despite what he had gone through last night. Certainly he hadn't inherited it from his father, for that creature was weak. Compromise was his meat and drink. This had been proved.

His father had been willing to believe, had counseled a waiting game to Billy's critics. He did not like to face an issue, and so had earned the contempt of his associates and his son.

So if the human side of himself were the stronger, here was food for thought. Could these powers, inherited from the paternal strain, be used for purely human purposes? Could he combat Old Nick, win over him?

Not without difficulty. That had been proved, too. Billy shuddered into his breakfast food, remembering that vague horror of the night before. He had been helpless then. But was there a way to fight that sort of thing, to make himself stronger than it?

He would investigate, today.

He went to the public library, missing his first class, and asked to see books on magic. The village library boasted only one work, badly written and uninformative. But he pored through flowery chapter after chapter until he came upon one fact which seemed useful. After he had made a mental note of it, he felt a touch on his shoulder.

"Hi, Bill," Fred Roth whispered. "What you doing here?"

"What are you?" Billy countered.

"Oh, I got an idea." Fred exhibited a book labeled "Commercial Drawing And Illustration." He smiled regretfully. "It takes a long time and a lot of money to become a really fine artist. But I could do this stuff, like Arthur William Brown, and McClelland Barclay, and James Montgomery Flagg. I could make some money, and then study serious art."

Billy glared. "You dope," he whispered fiercely. "If it doesn't mean anything to you, O. K. We'll say no more about it. But if it does, then get at it. The serious stuff, I mean. You can be another Grant Wood, if you got the guts."

"But I only thought—"

"Nuts! You're just lazy. That's O. K. with me, you understand. I don't care. It's up to you."

"But, Billy, I'll go for years without getting anything out of it. I'll have to eat somehow."

"They did," Billy pointed out. "They didn't starve."

"Well, I thought it was an idea," Fred replied. "All right, have it your way." He returned the book to the desk.

Billy walked to school with Fred. "What if you don't get rich at it?" he demanded. "Remember a guy named Da Vinci? And Michael Angelo? And Donizetti? I don't know enough about 'em to know whether they made a lot of money or not, but look how they've lived. They've done a lot of good. Well, who's going to remember the drawings of magazine illustrators a hundred years from now?"

"O. K., O. K.," Fred grunted.

"What's the matter with you?" Billy asked fiercely. "Are you gonna be an artist or not?"

"I said I was, didn't I? All right, you just watch."

"That's more like it," Billy conceded.

After school he tried to buy what he wanted at Riker's, but was told that it would take a few days. It had to be ordered from Kansas City.

At the dinner table, Jim Roberts opened the conversation which was to change Billy's life.

"Guess who came into the garage today to talk to me," he asked with an air of pride.

Billy and Lucille looked up.

"Well?" Lucille demanded. "Are you going to tell?"

"Mr. Andrews, that's who," Jim said triumphantly. "What do you think of that?"

"We're not overdrawn at the bank, Jim?" Lucille asked anxiously.

Jim's long, lined face was contemptuous. "Naw. He wanted to talk to me. Maybe you think I didn't feel like a fool. I was putting rings in old man Archer's car, and I was grease all over when he called down in the pit at me. He was dressed like J. P. Morgan, or somebody, and I—"

"What did he *want?*" Lucille cried.

Jim's face went blank. "Huh?" he said absently. He shook himself. "Oh. He wants to make a banker out of Billy."

"He—what?" Lucille asked.

"Yeah. Our kid. Whadda you know? Howd'ya like that, son?"

Billy suspended a bit of roast beef halfway to his mouth. "I don't know, dad. I hadn't thought about it. Why me?"

"Oh, he said he'd been watching you. Said you were a good, bright kid, just the kind who makes a success in that game: You could work Saturdays now, learning the ropes. Then, when you're out of school, you could start as a bookkeeper. He allowed you wouldn't be one long."

His mother, Billy thought, watched him anxiously, as if she hoped he'd say no.

"Well, I don't know," Billy said. "I guess it'd be all right."

"All right?" Jim cried. "I hope to tell you. The most solid business in this town. You could really be somebody after you worked up to it."

"What's this town?" Lucille asked with scorn. "A wide place in the road: He's got better things in him than that. I know it. He's different. Aren't you, baby?"

"Different, how?" Jim demanded. "He's just like the rest of the boys. Quieter than most, maybe, but coming out of it lately. And what's the matter with this town, I'd like to know? It was good enough for your father and mine. We sent a State senator from here once, Senator Higgins. My dad used to talk about it."

"Well, Billy's getting big enough to decide things for himself," Lucille said slowly. "If that's what he wants to be, I won't say anything. But I had hoped that he would be something really big. I wanted him to be a psychiatrist."

"A what?" Jim asked.

"A mind doctor. Like Freud."

"Never heard of him. Floyd? Who's he?"

"Freud," Lucille said. "He can tell you what kind of person you are by what you dream."

"*Agh!*" Jim said scornfully. "That stuff's for old women. Anybody can buy a dream book for a dime, and I don't hold with it, anyway."

"It isn't like that at all!" Lucille flared. "It's scientific. And Billy's got something special; don't think I haven't seen it."

"Well," Jim said dubiously, "maybe so. I don't know what you're talking about, but I guess it's all right. But it is up to him. Whadda you say, son?"

Billy twisted a sad little smile at his plate. He felt like crying. Each of them wanted him to become great according to their notion of greatness. And it was out of their hands, really.

"I don't care," he said. "Whatever you think."

"Well, then," Jim said, "why don't he go to work at the bank on Saturdays? Then if he don't like it, he can go out and be like this guy Floyd."

"Freud," Lucille murmured.

XI.

Among the customs of Mulveta High School was an assembly of the senior class sometime in the last three months before graduation to "Look At Life." The class sponsor—Gary Fargo in this instance—always made an admonitory speech containing most of the trite and hackneyed advice which students are subjected to at that time of their lives; and a student of the class was selected

to make another address.

Billy Roberts made up his mind that he should be this student. He was in possession of facts which his fellow students could not be expected to know. And although he could not give them a bald statement of these facts—they wouldn't believe him—he could give his conclusions. These might save them difficulty in later life, might thwart Old Nick to some extent.

That was the root of the matter. What had started out long ago to be a declaration of his own independence had now become a campaign against Old Nick. There would be consequences; he was sure of this. But he had taken steps to protect himself, and awaited the bell which would send the senior class into the study hall with some measure of serenity.

The means of his protection had finally arrived at Riker's. He could pick it up on the way home from school. It had required a month of writing to herb companies, but a Chinese store in New York had finally come through with five pounds of the dried leaves of English rue. According to what he had been able to find in books, that was protection.

It was with a spirit of defiance, that he faced his class after Mr. Fargo had mumbled the expected bromides. With a spirit of accomplishment, too, for he had labored over the writing of this speech, and had spent days in committing it perfectly to memory.

"I want to talk on the subject of 'Obligations,'" he began to the bored students. "There are many types of obligations, but all of them can be lumped under the general heading of 'Obligations to Society.'

"Men found out a long time ago that rules of behavior had to be drawn up, and that these rules of behavior had to be followed. Otherwise, they'd be shooting each other all the time. These rules are called laws, and they provided for the enforcement. You'll find out about laws. The quickest way is to break one.

"But they didn't write all of 'em down. They figured they didn't have to, because they exist implicitly in society. I'm talking about obligations that you don't find in the law books.

"Now there isn't any law that says you've got to tell the truth about what you did last night. That's a good thing, sometimes. And there isn't any law that says you have to meet your girl friend at the corner of Main and Elm, even if you did tell her you would.

"Because, look. If you don't meet her, she'll be sore. At least, the girls I know will. All right. So she waits around until she gives you up. She's got nothing to do, so she starts something she hadn't planned.

"The point I want to make is that that might change her whole life, and the lives of lots of others she comes into contact with. While she's angry, she'll be ready for things she wouldn't have considered otherwise, and those things sometimes wind up in scandal you never live down.

"You have an obligation, therefore, to do what you say you'll do. If your word's no good, you're a weak plank in the basic platform of society.

"Here's another point, even more important than the last one. Now all of us know it's fun to play jokes on people. Now that's all right, as long as people know it's a joke as soon as it's over. But half the fun is in not telling until they find it out by themselves.

"I'll tell you about one. There was a kid about nine years old, or maybe he was twelve, it doesn't matter. Anyway, he was in the Union Station in St. Louis. A man in a big hurry ran up and asked where a certain train pulled out. The kid didn't know, but he knew that the train he'd come in on wasn't the train the man wanted. So it was a good joke to direct him to that train. The kid had a good laugh.

"But he found out later that the man was headed for a big conference. When he got on the wrong train, he was de-

layed so long in getting back on the right one that the conference was over. The stuff he had in his brief case would have changed the decision of that conference, would have prevented a big company from folding up, would have stopped a couple of men working a stock deal that ruined thousands of people who had put their money into the company. He was ruined along with them, and his children didn't receive the education they would have.

"Sure, it was a good joke to the kid, because all he saw at the time was a man pelting down to catch the wrong train. It wasn't much of a joke when he learned what happened.

"So there's another obligation to society. Don't bring confusion and mix-ups into the lives of others. And insist that nobody does it to you. Insist that they keep their word, and you keep yours.

"A practical joke can cause more damage than you might think. Don't play 'em, unless you let people know it is a joke as soon as it's over.

"Look, accidents are bound to happen, and sometimes they ruin people's lives. You can't prevent accidents. But you can prevent the sort of thing I've mentioned. I could give you other examples, but that one is enough to tell you what I mean.

"It isn't enough just to do unto others what you'd like them to do to you. There are loopholes in that. But if you do what you *ought* to, in the interests of society as a whole, you'll get along all right."

The final bell rang at this point, and Billy's audience began to stir. They gathered their belongings under arms and set themselves for a quick dash for the door as soon as they were dismissed.

Billy said, "I guess there's no use going on with this. You wouldn't remember, anyway. That's all I have to say."

His speech hadn't come off. Marlin and Fred told him as much, walking home from school.

"Well, anyway," Marlin said, "it meant as much as Mr. Fargo's speech. And that was absolutely nothing. What do you think we're going to do, go around the rest of our lives pushing little ducks in the water for a laugh?"

"Here comes old man Whitaker," Fred said. "Let's tell him it's Tuesday instead of Friday, and then Bill can finish his speech."

"Never mind," Billy said wearily. "I should have known better, with a bunch of morons."

Here was further evidence of his being tricked, he thought. He had wanted to tell them to be careful, that evil eyes watched, evil forces waited; that outside the ken of their imagination were creatures poised to pounce on the slightest misstep and turn it to advantage. He had wanted them to understand that excesses—that is, any departure from the norm—led surely down the path of destruction. But he hadn't used the words. He hadn't known the words. The ideas he had wanted to disseminate were at odds with Old Nick's philosophy. So he hadn't known the words.

Perhaps it was true that his tongue had been touched. This had been demonstrated when he put Dr. Stone back on the path he had been intended to tread. That hadn't meant much to Billy, and it *could* have been a step toward the eventual dissolution of Dr. Stone. But when all the cards were down—as when he was speaking to Marlin, or his classmates—his words fell short.

Very well, then. Why have any truck with the whole works? Why not throw it over—if he could.

He could try.

"I've got to stop in at Riker's," he said. "You want to wait outside here for me?"

He went in. Mr. Riker peered over his glasses, pored through them at a bill of lading.

"Just a minute, Billy."

The old man limped into the back room, returned with a bulky, boxed package. He set this on the counter,

told Billy the price. Billy paid, and started to pick up the package.

A feeling of nausea ran through him before he picked it off the counter. His stomach turned over. He was repelled from the brown box. It had no odor, it had no objectionable appearance. But he couldn't touch it. If he did, he would lose his dinner.

He backed away sharply, as if he had been struck in the face, and the nausea went away. If he stayed beyond reach, the package didn't seem to affect him.

"I'm sick," Billy said. "I've got to go. I'll have Fred Roth pick this up. I've got to—"

He ran outside. He leaned panting against the store. He hadn't counted on this.

Still, it was logical. He was part demon. It should react against him. And the sickness that swept over him wasn't of the fatal variety. If he carried the box, he would vomit, yes. But what would be its effect on the supervisor? Surely it would be more acute?

"What's the matter?" Marlin asked. "Did you swallow a worm?"

"Nothing. I'm just sick."

"Why? What happened?"

"Nothing." He looked at Fred. "Will you pick up that package in there and carry it home for me? I've got to go."

Billy ran off alone. He didn't want to get close to that package, except in the privacy of his own room.

Fred brought it to him, dumped it on the floor.

"Want me to open it, Bill?"

"No, thank. I'll do it."

Now came the hard part. He had to circle his bed with the leaves. He tried. He was sick in the bathroom.

He tried again. He was sick again.

Finally, he opened the box, retching constantly. But it had to be done. He placed the leaves tip to tip under the carpet around his bed and then crawled into it, hoping he would die.

He was beyond the effect of the leaves that encircled him, but his sickness had been so violent that he had no energy whatever. He lay back on his pillow, fully clothed, pale, breathing loudly.

He knew that he could never step over that circle. He was trapped here. He had felt the increase in the effect of the rue when the circle had been completed. It had literally flung him back against his bed. Of course, he could ask Jim Roberts or his mother to lift up the carpet and break the circle, but he shrank from that.

They thought he was sick. They wanted to call Dr. Stone. Billy dissuaded them. He didn't want a doctor. He wanted to be left alone. After some argument, they acceded.

Then came the task of waiting for midnight. The hours crept, but they passed. As they passed he became more and more aware of the circle of dried leaves around his bed.

First, there had been a sense of great relief, being in the center and beyond reaching distance of the limits of the circle. Then had come a faint, almost imperceptible discomfort. This had increased slowly until he had no appetite. The thought of food sickened him. Nausea remained at this level until his visitor arrived.

"My son!" it gasped. "What have you done? What are you trying to do?"

"You can't get through," Billy said.

His father became grim. "A serpent's tooth," he grated. "Oh, ungrateful son! You will pay, and pay, and pay to the end of eternity. Think you to scorn your heritage, throw it aside, with impunity? Not so, not so! You . . . you *angel!*"

With this vituperative exclamation, his father vanished. He was not alone for long.

Shadow shapes appeared. There were millions, it seemed. They clustered, they pressed long noses against the invisible barrier created by the herb. They sniffed, they looked for an opening. Billy watched, uncomfortable and un-

easy, as the fantastic shapes flitted about his bed trying to break through. But triumph still persisted. They couldn't get at him.

Then the supervisor came.

"Now look, bud," he said. "If you give up, we'll be easy on you. And you might as well. You can't get away with it. We'll get you in the end. You'll get sicker and sicker, as each day goes by until you finally starve to death. Then we'll have you. It won't be very easy then, let me tell you."

"Go away," Billy said.

"Sure, sure. But look, bud. Why make it tough for yourself? All right, so you don't like what you are. You can be different. We'll help you. But not if you act like this. We're your friends, bud. You can trust us."

"Go away."

"But don't you see what it's going to do to you? You'll be in a mess in hell, and I'm not kidding. Give up now, break that circle, and everything will be rosy. You have my word on it."

"Go away."

"Well, if you're going to be difficult," the supervisor sighed. "Come and get him, fella."

There had been millions before. There was one now. This was a weird-looking creature of an incredible age. What was designed to be its face was wizened, puckered, shrunken. The hands, or what passed for hands, were twisted and green. Its body was a nightmare of skinny lines.

It made passes. It chanted gibberish.

With each pass, with each unintelligible phrase, Billy jerked. It felt as if he were prodded with white-hot irons. He had no muscular control whatever.

This went on for some time.

If only, Billy thought desperately, he knew where the next prod was coming from. But they struck from unexpected angles, and he was whipped back and forth in his bed like a rag in the wind.

But it couldn't get through the circle. Billy clung to that thought. He must cling to it, through everything.

They didn't go away and leave him alone as before. They stayed the night, one torturer relieving the last. They gave him sensations of needles and swords, of kicks and blows, of heat and cold, the long night through. When day broke, they desisted in their torture, but they waited outside the circle for the next night to come.

They waited unseen, malevolent, when Lucille and Jim came in to find Billy almost unconscious from lack of sleep. They waited while Dr. Stone examined him and recommended hospitalization. They became alert when this suggestion was made.

They remained alert while Billy fought leaving his room.

"I won't go, I won't go!" he moaned over and over.

"But, Billy," Dr. Stone said mildly. "You're ill, boy. You're seriously ill. I can't determine the cause of it here, but we could locate it in the hospital and cure you."

"I won't go, I won't go, I won't!"

"But, Billy!" Lucille said anxiously. "You're our baby. We don't like to see you sick. You might even—"

"They won't kill me," Billy cut in. "They're scared to. I got right on my side."

"Delirium," Dr. Stone murmured. He became persuasive again. "Billy, I owe you a great deal. I'd like to repay you. Come along now, won't you, while you're still strong enough?"

"I'm going to be all right," Billy groaned. Beads of sweat popped on his forehead with the effort to be lucid. "Please go away and leave me. I can sleep sometime today. I'll get better, honest."

"Well," Dr. Stone said, "keep him here and watch him. Let me know if there's any change. His condition isn't serious enough to override his wishes. If he becomes worse, we'll take steps, naturally."

They left him alone. He slept, after

a fashion. Not well, because of the growing nausea, and the consciousness of those things just beyond the wall of rue.

He couldn't eat anything that day, and it was with a great deal of difficulty that he persuaded his mother and Jim Roberts to go to bed that night.

"If you get sick in the night," Lucille said in traditional phraseology of that part of the country, "call us. Will you?"

"Sure, sure. I'll be all right, though."

He wasn't all right. The tortures on the preceding night were a curtain raiser to what they did now. These pains were not bold and straightforward, like those of the night before. They were slow, heavy, subtle, sapping at his energy.

He had rebelled, and aroused the fury of Hell.

Could he possibly expect to beat them off, one boy against a myriad angers? He didn't know. He knew that he would try. He might die, but it would be worth it to show Old Nick that you couldn't make anything you liked of human nature no matter what the odds. Some vestige of resentment would flare up, and defeat Old Nick and his kind. So he might lose, but he would never be defeated.

He came very near it, on that second night. That dull, heavy pain which lay inside him very nearly reached the un-

bearable point. At times the supervisor appeared to taunt him, to demand surrender. Billy wasted no strength to deny him. He kept his silence, but he wanted to cry, "Enough." Then morning came, and they let up.

Morning came, and with it came Old Nick.

XII.

Old Nick didn't come inside. He stood in the doorway while Jim and Lucille came to Billy's bedside. Lucille felt his forehead; Jim looked on helplessly.

Billy shot a contemptuous glance at the bearded, dapper visitor. "You can't get to me, Nick. You can't come in."

Old Nick was amused. "There are many ways to skin a cat." To Lucille and Jim, he said, "It's rather . . . uh, close in here. If you'll carry him out, Jim, I'll see that he's cured."

"No!" Billy cried weakly. "Don't let him get me!"

"Why, Billy!" Lucille admonished. "Nick's our friend."

"Nuts!" Billy snorted. "He's the—"

He broke off. Why make them think he was out of his head? He filled with despair. He had lost, after all. He was more than a match for the minor minions, but Old Nick had the edge. Old Nick could do what he liked—except approach the bed. Even that was no advantage. It became apparent, immediately.

Jim slung Billy over his shoulder and carried him into the front room. Billy's nausea increased sharply as they crossed the circle, hidden under the carpet, then vanished once they were outside. Jim put him on the couch in the front room and stood back.

"He's feeling better," Jim announced. "The color's coming into his face."

"Yes," Old Nick murmured. "The atmosphere in there was not exactly healthy. What he needs now is a sulphur bath."

Billy relaxed. What did it matter, now? He had lost.

A worried frown formed between Lucille's blue eyes.

"I don't see how we can manage it," she said dubiously. "I guess we could borrow some money from the bank. He'd have to go to Wyoming, I guess."

Old Nick held up a hand. "This one is on me," he said. "I'll have him back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Lucille said. "You'd have to fly. That's expensive. We couldn't let you do it, Nick."

Old Nick silenced her with a negligent hand. "Don't worry about it. I'd do anything to straighten him out. Come on, Billy."

"Wait till I pack a bag for him, then."

"That won't be necessary," Old Nick said.

Billy lay quietly on the couch, and strength surged back into him. It was strictly physical strength, however; he had no energy or will to fight Old Nick. It was so futile. He could see that now.

"Come on, Billy," Old Nick said again, and with a sense of compulsion, Billy followed him out of the house.

He cast back a look at the little cottage, and at Jim and Lucille on the porch.

"Good-by," he said.

Good-by and good-by. It had been a noble experiment. It had failed. He had not been able, in the last push, to hold them off. They had made him strong, but not strong enough. They had tricked him with false hope.

He paid little attention to the way they trod, he and Old Nick. What did it matter? The fight was done, the battle lost.

The final part of the way was a twisting path through flickering lights. It led at last into a great throned chamber.

Before the throne was a five-pointed platform, and Old Nick bade Billy to stand on it. Then Old Nick took his seat on the throne. Billy looked at him with dull and weary interest, noting the new aspect without shock, without surprise.

He was still Old Nick, yes. Amusement flickered in his yellow eyes. But he was black and shining now, magnificent with a touch of sadness. The Black Prince in exile.

The high-domed chamber began to glow. The hidden light source brought glitter and a savage splendor. Billy and Old Nick were alone, one wearily defiant, the other sadly amused.

The throne room began to fill. First came others fashioned like Old Nick, but lacking the regal mien. They formed a dark and shining phalanx beside the throne.

Then came hundreds to fill the floor. They were not frightening, despite furious expressions, for they had familiar shapes. Among them was his father, Billy knew, though he could not pick the creature from the angry ranks. Among them was the supervisor, too.

Once, these had been men. Now they were servitors. Was this to be his fate also?

He faced them without fear from the raised pentagram. He faced them with contempt. He had lost, but he had lost honorably. He was outnumbered, hundreds to one. No stigma of defeat attached to his circumstance; no stigma of surrender, either.

Old Nick spoke to the glowering mass as he had spoken to men, with a touch of contemptuous amusement.

"In the interests of harmony, I have acceded to the request of your committee. I have brought Billy Roberts to trial. Who wishes to bring charges?"

"I do!"

One stepped forward out of the ranks. He strode furiously toward Billy, recoiled just before he touched one of the points of the pentagram. He glowered. He was the supervisor.

"We had a good thing in this punk, Nick. His old man's a dope, all right, but he was cooking off the top coals when he pulled this one out of his stovepipe. And the punk fell in with us. He knew what he was meant to do, and he did it—for a while. Then he doubled on us. So we slapped him around a little, and he fell in line again. To do what? To get cute, that's what. He read a book, the scut. But he lied, and that's the main thing. He said he was cooking up a mess of trouble for the little bunch he jolted out of their paths in the first place. He got 'em back in that groove, and I'm . . . well, I'm blessed, Nick, if he didn't leave 'em there. Then he gives us the brush-off. Now what can you do with a rat like that? All I ask is, give him to me. My squad will figure something to do—for a long time."

The hush that fell was presently broken by an angry mutter of agreement among the ranks of those who had been human. This welled up until the great chamber shivered. Old Nick cut it short with a raised hand.

"I have rather idly wondered for a long time," he told them dryly, "who was the stronger, you or human beings. We have an answer here, of a sort."

Old Nick stood, his robe of office shining in the light. He paced across and back on the dais of his throne. He spoke mildly.

"You may remember that when this experiment was first proposed, I said that it didn't matter how it turned out. It has mattered in this respect: I have an answer to my idle question.

"I gave you permission to experiment because I thought it might be entertaining to watch. It was. I saw him as an infant swear eternal independence. I watched his first deceits. I saw the demonic strain dominate—for a while.

"I enjoyed his awkward failures at bringing order out of the confusion he had created. Then I observed what should serve here as an object lesson—the emergence of the human strain. There were some lapses, but on the whole this side of him gained steadily. He looked on his fellow creatures and, like his mother, found them good. What he did for a short time was not in his

own interests, but in theirs. This brought results which he desired, for the motivations were at odds with those in the other facet of his heritage; which brought only confusion and eventual residence here."

Old Nick's tone changed. It became sharper, admonitory. He flashed the ranks a dark look.

"If you had let him be, we should have seen the next phase. He would surely have brought confusion and damnation again to those he was trying to save, for his motivation no longer stemmed from human traits. He was out simply to do me in the eye. A characteristic I have seen here, somewhat to my annoyance."

The ranks surged back from the crack of Old Nick's voice. Billy sensed their fear again. It was abject, pitiful.

"But no," Old Nick went on scornfully. "You were not content to let matters take their course. In your, er, damned adolescence you had to plunge ahead. My aeons of waiting, of accepting what comes my way, of grasping such opportunities as present themselves—you gained nothing from them. You ignored my counsel.

"And so he has beaten you, at your own game by your own rules. It is not he who should be punished; it is you."

Old Nick paused reflectively, and Billy could feel the cold fear which settled over the ranks, the breathless fright.

"As I remarked," Old Nick went on, "it has satisfied my idle curiosity. Human beings are the stronger. They will always beat you, when your opposition is active. Enough of them will come to Hell in their own hand basket, but when that prerogative is threatened they will turn and destroy the tangible threat to their independence.

"I have told you time after time that the imbalances of human nature will bring our share to us. They are like the horse: you may lead him to drink, but you cannot always drive him.

"It was a beautiful theory, this scattering of focal points of confusion throughout humanity, but it fails in practice because human beings are stronger than you. They walk their own road, whether that be to an insipid glory or to damnation.

"Wait! Watch! It is the greatest show on earth. When opportunity offers, sow your seed of temptation. It is not only gratifying to do so, but sometimes offers high sensual pleasure.

"Now to the point. You ask that this boy be turned over to you. I say he is not ready, that you will never break his spirit. And if you do not break it, you have failed. The Council will decide"—he nodded at the dark and shining phalanx—"but my advice is to leave him alone."

"But, Nick," the supervisor cried. "You mean, let him go back?"

"I do."

"But think what it would do to prestige! If human beings ever learn that they are stronger than we are, we're cooked. We might as well shut up shop and go fishing. And he's just the boy to tell 'em, after what's happened."

"Hm-m-m, yes. Perhaps."

"That'd be a grace of a note!" the supervisor exclaimed. "We work our tails off here, and, if you let him go, we're ruined. You don't want the Others to win, do you?"

"I think we should provide against the contingency that puts you in such a blather. How about it, Billy? What do you think?"

A sense of unreality had begun to come over Billy while Nick, impassive and sardonic, addressed the assembled horde. Surely this was not happening? Surely it was out of his fevered imagination? He was sick in bed at home; this was a nightmare.

These were phantasms. If he could only wake up, they would vanish.

He stood erect on the pentagram. He swept them with arrogant eyes.

"I'm not afraid of you," he said. "You can't do anything to me. All I have to do is open my eyes and *p-f-f-f-t!* you're

gone. You're just something I dreamed up. I'm a human being. I don't lie. I keep my word. And if somebody else lies, I don't want anything to do with him. Even if I ever was part demon, I'm not any more. I'm not afraid. You hear? I'm not afraid. You can't be real, you just can't!"

"This *is* interesting," Old Nick commented. "You've known since you were a baby that part of your heritage lay here. If you can throw all that aside in one moment, I'd like to know the mental processes behind it."

"Look at 'em!" Billy snarled. He waved at the massed ranks on the floor of the glowing chamber. "You say I'm like them? They're like whipped dogs. They shiver when you say 'boo' at 'em. I couldn't be like 'em. They're filthy. They're dirty inside. They're—bad!"

The loathing in his voice was like a lash across their faces. They stirred, muttered, moved a step toward him.

"Come on!" he cried. "You're two hundred to my one; and that makes it about even." He whirled on Old Nick. "I never was like them! They gang up. They pick on somebody who can't stand up to 'em. Then, when somebody does, they run for help."

Old Nick flashed the ranks a smile full of teeth. "He has you there, boys." To Billy: "But I thought all this wasn't real. You speak now as if it were."

The voice was so quiet, so objective, that a little tongue of fear flickered in Billy. He looked long and hard at Old Nick. The image he saw was sharp and clear. He looked at the others, the dark and glittering, the evil horde.

It was real.

His shoulders slumped. "I don't know," he said in a small voice. "It seemed for a minute I was dreaming. I wanted it that way. But I remember. All my life, people have had to look at me a second time before they could see me clearly. They never mentioned it, because they got used to it. I've seen 'em do it to you, and I can see you all right. I guess that proves something."

He was silent. There was no movement anywhere.

"I guess," he went on dully, wearily, "you got me. Do what you want. I won't try to fight you, Nick, because you've always been stronger than me. I didn't ask to be born the way I was, but that doesn't matter, does it? You always had the edge. But as for them"—he straightened his shoulders, looked at the ranks with flashing eyes—"come and get me, then, you—scum! I'm better than you are, and you know it!"

A sharp, eerie cry went up from their midst. "Oh, my son, my son!"

Billy spat, exclaimed in revolted horror, *"Phtaaa!"*

The ranks surged forward. They rolled across the bright floor in a wave of fury, red and fiery eyes flaming with hatred.

Billy planted his feet widely apart, brought clenched fists to his waist. One good sock, that's all he wanted.

They never reached him. When they came to the pentagram, they recoiled, yelping with pain. The front ranks fell to the gleaming floor, were trampled by those who in turn fell and in turn were trampled until knowledge of futility penetrated and they stood back. Those on the floor scrambled up. All faced Old Nick in fearful trembling.

He chuckled. "Naturally, I protected him. Back to your places!" This was unadulterated savagery, and they fell back as if before a whip.

There was a short, contemplative silence.

"You have suggested the solution, Billy, to this rather awkward situation," Old Nick said. "I am sure the Council will take it into consideration. It would be better, I think—better from my viewpoint, you understand—to place a Cone of Silence around you while the Council deliberates."

Instantly a soundless void closed around Billy. He could see, but could hear nothing.

He saw the dark, glittering beings confer. He saw Nick speak to them,

smoothly, suavely. He saw the impassioned supervisor gesture at them. He waited. Presently a spokesman from the Council spoke briefly.

Old Nick nodded with dark pleasure. He waved his hand again, and—

They were at Billy's gate. Lucille and Jim came out to meet them.

"Hello, mother," Billy said cheerfully. "Hello, dad. Mr. Nicholas had the right treatment, all right."

Old Nick clapped Billy on the shoulder. "We shall see, we shall see," he said.

XIII.

He signed the foreclosure notice and, as usual, liked the looks of his signature. "W. J. Roberts, manager." One of these days it would read "president," as soon as weak-willed, doddering old Andrews kicked off. He was the youngest manager in the history of the bank; soon, he should be its youngest president.

W. J. That was a matter of pride, too. Nobody called him Billy any more, except his mother. He thought idly of his mother.

He really should get over to see her more often. It was probably true that she was lonely, now that Jim had died in that automobile wreck last year. But the future of the bank, and the future of Mulveta took nearly all of his time. When he became president, he would have more opportunities for duty calls.

If old Andrews would only hurry and get it over with. The bank would be better off without him. Look at the way he'd acted over this foreclosure. Sure, old Kirby's wife and daughter had died, and it had been expensive to bury them. But was that the bank's affair? It was not. Collecting the mortgage payments was the bank's only business with Kirby.

But the directors had come around, though it had been like pulling teeth to make them agree to put Kirby off the land. You'd think that grown men would have outgrown the disgusting softness they displayed in the meeting yesterday. Besides, if that canning factory came here, old Kirby's farm would be the perfect site, and the bank would make another profit. That wasn't the main point, though. He liked the way he had told those men, all at least twice his own age, what the main point was.

"Society," he had said, "is built around the premise that agreements will be carried out by both parties. The bank loaned Kirby money on his farm. That was the simple, legal fact. Drought, mismanagement, misfortune, or any other reasons behind the need for that loan were not the affairs of the bank. But Kirby's signed agreement to repay that loan by a certain time was the affair of the bank. He has failed to do so. To grant him an extension is merely to confess our disbelief in the basic plank in the platform on which society is built. We must believe in it! We must keep that platform solid!"

Oh, he had brought them around, in the end. It was a matter of pride that he could bring almost anybody around. Maybe he could be a State senator, after all, as soon as he was old enough. Then this country should see things!

There would be no shilly-shallying then, once he was in the Senate. This country would learn not to meddle in the affairs of other nations, and the government would learn to keep its hands out of private business.

Gloria would like being the wife of a senator.

There was a small, discreet cough. Billy raised his eyes, and his mouth dropped open as he saw that he had a visitor. He blinked, for the figure was slightly out of focus. He looked again. It was Old Nick, dapper, white-bearded, white-haired, yellow-eyed.

"How did you get in here?" Billy demanded. "My secretary had orders—"

"I slipped past her and came through the keyhole," Old Nick said blandly. "How are you, Billy?"

"I'm going to fire that girl. If she'd sleep at night like decent people should,

things like this wouldn't happen. Well, since you *are* here—though I still can't see why I didn't hear the door—what can I do for you? I'm pretty busy."

"I won't keep you long," Old Nick said. "It's been six years since I saw you last, and since I was coming through here I thought I'd drop in and see how my ex-protégé was doing."

"Protégé?" Billy said. "I pride myself on the fact that I'm self-made. Nobody helped me."

"You married Gloria," Old Nick pointed out.

"But I was manager of the bank first, and she had nothing to do with my promotion. Why, I hadn't seen her more than three times before I was running things here."

"I see," Old Nick murmured. "May I sit down? This looks like a comfortable chair."

"I'm afraid I—" Billy began. He stopped, frowned as a memory formed, then smiled without mirth. "Yes, go ahead. I have something to tell you." He reconstructed pictures in his mind. "I had a nightmare about you, once, Nicholas. It seemed we were in a big place, and you were judging me. I hadn't thought of it since, until you popped in here. Silly, isn't it?"

"It *was* silly," Old Nick said.

Billy blinked. Why had he told the old fool about that dream?

"What did you want to see me about?" he asked coolly.

"Why, I ran into two friends of yours. I saw Fred Roth in New York. He doesn't like his job."

"Fred's a fool," Billy snorted. "He studied art for five years all over Europe, and what did he intend to do with it? He wanted to come back here, get a job as janitor, and paint landscapes! Ye gods! Landscapes! Not only that, but he had refused a good job in a New York advertising agency, where he could make some money and amount to something. Well, I showed him the error of his ways. It took me a week, but he finally agreed it was time he started making a place for himself in society."

"You needn't worry," Old Nick said, "about his ever painting. He spends all his spare time playing in a band. The leader used to play here. Sammy Saltzer. You may remember him."

"No. Well, I'm through with Fred. I saved him twice, once from the law, and that time the crazy old coot . . . what was his name, Folsom? . . . shot him. Though God knows why I took him to Stone. It was just luck the old fool didn't kill him."

"Speaking of Dr. Stone—" Old Nick said. "But first, how is he?"

"He's a drunken wreck," Billy said with contempt. "I don't know where he gets the liquor; there's not a drop in Mulveta except in the private cellars of some of the better element, but he gets it. My mother-in-law very justly kicked him out some five years ago. I saw to it that young Dr. Ames, who came here shortly after that, got ahead. Dr. Stone doesn't have any patients now except some riffraff down by the water works. And they're the lowest kind of charity cases."

"I see. I saw another friend of—"

Billy's telephone rang. "Hello," he said. "Oh, hello, Mr. Fargo. I'm glad you called. Did you read Joe Wakeman's editorial this morning? . . . Well, he quoted my speech to the Business Men's luncheon. He put me in the position of hounding that Evans girl, er, Mrs. Melville she is now. . . . Yes, I'm in full agreement with you on that. She should not be allowed to associate with the decent element here. If she wants to marry a notorious playboy like Melville, that's her business. But I say to keep her tainted affairs out of this city. . . What? . . . No, he didn't say a word, actually, about me, except to print my speech. The insult was in the caption, 'The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained.' . . . It made me boil, too. . . . I agree with you. I can't take part openly in blackballing him out of the club, but I'm

with you all the way. Thank you. Good-by."

He hung up, stared grimly at the phone. His long, youthful face showed deep lines on either side of his mouth. "People might as well learn now," he said aloud, "that moral turpitude hasn't a chance in this town. Or learn it the hard way, from me and the Fargos." He turned to Old Nick, blinked, focused cold, hard eyes. "Did you want anything else?"

"I saw Marlin, too," Old Nick said quietly.

A pang hit Billy's heart. It was momentary, gone with the instant, but it evoked memories. It evoked something else, too. His eyes softened, took on a faraway look.

"How is she?" he asked. It was almost a whisper.

"Oh, the same as ever," Old Nick said easily. "She does what she enjoys, sees whom she likes, sends her father money which she earns as a model. She goes her own way. I have wondered why you didn't marry her. You could have, you know. She sent you her love, incidentally."

"I suppose I could have," Billy assented.

Old Nick's tone indicated that he was speaking to a very gay dog, indeed. "You could have. You had a way with women, Billy."

Billy flushed, smiled complacently. Then his eyes were hard again. "Marlin was hardly the, er, type for me. She was really no better than she should be. People were right about that. So it just wouldn't do for me to have married her. I tried to make her change. She wouldn't, so she went her way, and I went mine. It's best that way."

"No, Marlin will never change," Old Nick agreed. "That is one of my sorrows. People like her, who take their destiny in their own two hands, are rare. Nothing affects them but their own sense of rightness. A pity."

"You're pretty old to make a play for a girl her age," Billy said in a half growl.

Old Nick shrugged. "Age wasn't the reason for my failure, or yours. Marlin's own integrity was the reason. We need not have bothered. Ah, well." He got to his feet. "I can wait for the next one. I have found that if I wait long enough, I usually succeed."

"You're an old rake, Nick," Billy said with heavy joviality.

Nick twinkled at him. "Well, I'll get along. I must say, Billy, that I am pleased with you. Highly pleased."

"It was nice of you to drop in," Billy said politely. "When will you be back?"

"I doubt very much," Old Nick said, "if I shall come here again. It was curiosity that brought me. I watched you grow up, you know. You were unique, as a boy."

"I—guess so," Billy said hesitantly. "I don't remember very much about it. People say I've changed a lot, but I don't see it. Why, Joe Wakeman called me inhuman the other day."

Old Nick chuckled. "Oh, you're human. Wholly human. I saw to that, six years ago, when you were sick."

"You *did* help me," Billy said. "I had forgotten. But all you did was take me some place to be cured. A sulphur spring in Wyoming, wasn't it? But you didn't do anything to *me*."

"No," Old Nick agreed. "You had already formed a pattern of conduct. Human conduct, the kind I like. You can tell Editor Wakeman he's mistaken."

"I'll tell him to go to hell."

"Good!" Old Nick said. "The more the merrier."

There was a pause. Billy shuffled the foreclosure notice around on his desk. "Well, uh—since I won't see you again, Nick, good-by."

"Oh, I'll see you," Old Nick said. He went to the door, paused, added pleasantly, "Some day."

THE END.

Conscience, Ltd.

by Jack Williamson

William Platt was a very upright man—so upright he had committed three acts which doomed him. And his punishment was the impossible task of correcting the results of his acts—

Illustrated by Orban

Nobody saw Murray Staples come into the crowded district courtroom. A trim, worried man in gray, he walked under the unseeing eyes of Sheriff Dixon, and glanced at the wall clock above Judge Prendick's head. With a puzzled expression, he hurried on down the aisle, through the breathless hush of a tense legal battle. He set his heavy brief case on the end of the long table cluttered with the papers of the prosecution, and frowned again at the clock.

Nobody noticed him. He caught the elbow of District Attorney William Platt, who was just rising to address the court. But Platt shook him off, with a little shuddery gesture, and turned to sum up his case for the jury. Hurriedly, with thin nervous fingers, Staples opened the bulging brief case. He fumbled for a thin gray card, and read again:

OFFICE MEMO

TO: Murray Staples, Deputy Advocate
SUBJECT: Call for William Platt
PLACE: District courtroom, Clifton
TIME: Expires November 14, 5:19 p. m.

The clock above Judge Prendick's habitual sleepy snarl already said five twenty. But Staples looked at the accurate watch on his wrist, and found that the courtroom clock was three minutes fast. Still unnoticed, although he was drumming nervously on the edge of the table, he waited impatiently.

District Attorney Platt was a tall, gaunt man, lean as a bloodhound. Inflexible justice flashed a glacial blue in his deep-set eyes. His thin-lipped mouth was stern with rigid self-restraint, his iron jaw square with rectitude. The pallor of an exhausted but triumphant crusader was gray on his hawk-nosed face.

This had been a trying day. Honoria had called him early, to keep an appointment with Dr. Venwick. Platt protested that he had no time to be ill. But Honoria was always right—that was why she had become the second Mrs. Platt. He went to see the doctor.

When the examination was done, Dr. Venwick laid his stethoscope aside, and fussed needlessly with the sac and tubes of the blood-pressure manometer. Something gave Platt a chill of icy alarm. There was a sudden hush, so that he could hear the loud, uneven beat of his

own hurrying pulse; and the stabbing glitter of cold white light on bright steel instruments became acutely painful. At last the doctor turned.

"We had better face the facts, Bill." He put on a careful professional frown, over his best poker face. "We've got a heart condition, here. Not too serious, yet. But we'd better ease the strain. I'd suggest you take a long vacation."

Dr. Venwick's best poker face wasn't very good. Platt's ability to read it had earned him several fifty-dollar pots—before he married Honoria and joined the church and quit playing stud in the locker room at the Clifton Country Club. He knew what the doctor was thinking.

"You can't give me a death sentence, doc." His fine voice was brittle with urgency. "I haven't got time to let go. The Pickens case goes to the jury today. It's in the bag—and it's the best break I've ever had. The city papers are covering it. It will give me a chance to accomplish some of the things I was elected to do."

Controlled again, his voice dropped confidentially.

"Listen, doc. Keep this quiet, but the grand jury is going to give me an indictment against Tanner. He has had the city hall in his vest pocket long enough. I've been working on the case for months, and I've got the evidence to turn him out. Can't you fix me up, doc, so I can go on?"

"Not much that I can do," Venwick said gravely. "I'm afraid you'll have to slow up, Bill—or pay the penalty."

"Then I'll pay it, if I must." Platt's gray hawk face was stern, with righteous determination. "But I'm going to hang that gun moll, first, and put Tanner and his grafting gang where they belong."

Dr. Venwick's warning was the first jolt, and Stella administered the second. On his way to the courtroom, Platt found her waiting in his office. Stella had been the first Mrs. Platt. But it was six years since he had seen her, now, and at first he scarcely knew her.

Stella was the only daughter of his former law partner, old Murray Staples. She had been only a slim, dark-haired girl, when they were married. They didn't get on. She was extravagant and irresponsible, from the very first, and she soon took up with a fast crowd. Finally he discovered that she had made a week-end trip to Kansas City with Arthur Tanner, when she was supposed to be visiting her invalid aunt. Tanner was already an enemy of Platt's, and this transgression was beyond forgiveness. He divorced her, and he hadn't seen her since. Now she was waiting in a chair by his desk; a blond, hard-enameled, artificial stranger. Her eyebrows were penciled sharply, her lashes dark with mascara, her lips a hard perfect bow. She lazily crushed a red-stained cigarette, and gave him a cold languid hand.

"Why, Bill dear, you look almost ill." Her suave husky voice was as artificial as the color of her hair. "Aren't you glad to see your little darling Stellabel?"

Platt winced from the deliberate mockery of that old pet name, and frowned at the reek of gin on her breath. He closed his mind against the aching memories the name recalled. It was impossible to believe he had ever called this cold stranger by such a name.

"I'm already late for court, Stella." He remained standing. "If you want to see me, you'll have to come back later."

Her throaty voice turned hard.

"Better give me a few minutes, Bill."

"What do you want?"

She inhaled deliberately through another long cigarette.

"You're sitting pretty, Billy," she drawled through blue smoke. "I read all about you in the paper. You're going to hang Ysobel Pickens, and then you're going after my old pal Tanner." Platt winced again, from her hard-mouthed smile. "I want you to cut me into your little game, Willie—for a thousand dollars."

Platt blinked from the smoke in his

eyes, and uttered an outraged gasp.

"So you've sunk to blackmail?" Just anger rang in his voice. "I might have given you something, Stella, for charity's sake, if you had explained your need. But I won't shake down. I've got a clean record, and you know it."

"Cool off, Billy." With calm insolence, she crossed mesh-stockinged legs. "I don't give a damn about your record. But I know all about the Claypool bonds. I can tell the newspapers a story that will upset your pretty little playhouse."

Platt sat down heavily, his face turning dark.

"You wouldn't dare," he protested hotly. "It was your own father who embezzled the Claypool bonds. I didn't find out till after I was in the partnership. Then I helped him pay back the money and hush the thing up. My conscience is clear."

"Damn your conscience and your record," she drawled. "I was your wife and the old man's daughter. I can tell a story that plenty of dumb but honest voters will believe."

Platt's gray face turned hard.

"Go ahead," he said harshly. "If you want to smear your own father's name, for spite. But you won't get one penny out of me. You'll find out that honest men don't pay blackmail." Something throbbed painfully in his temple. "You're playing with fire, Stella. You ought to know that I've made a career out of smashing evil." He stalked to open the door.

She put down the cigarette and slowly rose. Something had melted a little of her artificial hardness. Her crimson lip trembled. He saw the glint of a tear under her lashes.

"I guess you've done a pretty good job of smashing me already." Holding the door, Platt felt a momentary twinge of pity. But her drawling, insolent voice turned hard again. "Better think it over, Willie. You've got a lot to lose."

Platt shut the door and tried to quiet his fluttering pulse. Dr. Venwick had warned him not to get upset. Now his anger had turned him cold and ill. But he was in the right. He had settled generously with Stella, before he put her out of his life. Surely she wouldn't dare try anything. If she did, he grimly assured himself, she would go to prison.

Yet conscience nagged at him, faintly. Once he had loved slim, dark-eyed, little Stella Staples—though it was hard to see anything of her left in this cold, brittle, made-in-Hollywood product. He wondered just why she needed a thousand dollars. He felt a momentary impulse to call her back and try to talk things over in a more friendly way.

But he was already almost late for court.

The case was sensational. The stuffy, overheated courtroom was packed to the walls when Platt arrived, with spectators who had crowded in to see Ysobel Pickens on trial for her life. Most of them, he knew, expected him to get the death sentence he was fighting for.

Yet, many a citizen of Clifton felt a kind of pride in Ysobel Pickens, because her audacious exploits had put the little city on the map. The tellers in the Clifton National still proudly pointed out the bullet marks she had made when tipped-off officers trapped her gang there. Her last shot killed a deputy, and she was on trial for murder.

Her attorney was Arthur Tanner, Platt's old enemy. That was one cause of his determination to win a dramatic victory—it would make a good background for the coming indictment of Tanner himself.

Tanner was a big man, and still handsome in his rugged way, in spite of a paunch and thinning hair. Red from good living, his wide face was furrowed into a perpetual jolly smile, to which his shrewdly squinted eyes gave a cold contradiction. He was an affable speaker and a clever lawyer. Platt had had a long experience with his unscrupulous methods, and he had been a little worried by Tanner's seeming laxness in the

defense of this case. He was still uneasily watchful for some unprincipled trick.

Late that afternoon, however, when Tanner rested for the defense, he had failed to score an important point. Platt was sure his case was won. This was a high point of his career, and he wanted to make the most of it. He was pleasantly aware of the big-city reporters at the tables arranged for them opposite the jury box, and he had got used to smiling into blinding flash guns.

It was five twenty when Platt rose to make his triumphant summation for the jury. His gray face was flushed with victory—yet something made him shiver as he addressed the court. The breathless tension of the moment made him cold and ill. The painful throb was back in his temple, his hands and feet felt clammy, and he wished he had a dose of bicarbonate. For a moment he stood dazed and voiceless.

"Gentlemen of the jury—" His voice came back. It was a mellifluous instrument, trained to carry sweet persuasion or tears of regret or gentle admonition or a storm of righteous wrath. "Gentlemen—look at this woman."

Ysobel Pickens, on Tanner's shrewd advice, was clothed in modest and becoming black. But her long fingernails were still defiantly red; and perhaps out of sheer panic she had used so much lipstick that her sullen, pouting lips were a scarlet wound in her terror-whitened face.

As she cringed beneath the jury's staring eyes, Platt had a vague disturbed sense that he had known her somewhere before. Conscience whispered uneasily. He wished for a moment that he had made a sympathetic effort to understand how she had become what she was. Suddenly he wondered if she had really earned the penalty of death.

Her dark, hollow eyes flashed him a look of trapped and helpless hate. But Tanner, beside her, appeared alarmingly unconcerned. Platt felt the stir of excitement that swept through the crowded room, and that doubtful whisper was forgotten. Once more he was the crusader, and Tanner was the champion of all wickedness.

"Look at her." His pliant voice held a practiced scorn. "Look through the rags and tatters of her soiled beauty, and you will see the ugly stain of evil on her sordid soul."

That touched the opening note he wanted. It woke the weather-beaten farmers and pink-scrubbed mechanics and oily-haired merchants in the jury box, and touched their complacent faces with just the right mixture of lust and disgust. His voice turned piously moderate again.

"Gentlemen, I would not be harsh or vengeful, and I know that you would not. But I believe in a Creator, gentlemen, as you do. I believe in Heaven, for good must be rewarded and the soul can never die. And I am old-fashioned enough to believe in Hell, for evil must be punished."

He saw the fat little smiles of self-righteous agreement. Ysobel Pickens dropped her head and started to whimper. But Tanner whispered some word of encouragement—Platt wondered uneasily what it might be—and she blew her nose and sat up straight and painted her lips defiantly. Platt waited a moment, to let the jurors see, and he noted their stiff disapproval.

"That is the law." Now his voice had a ring of iron. "And the law must be upheld for the preservation of society. Yes, gentlemen, for the protection of your homes and your dear ones."

On the wall, above Judge Prendick's sleepy snarl, the hands of the courtroom clock crept toward five twenty-two. Ysobel Pickens was shredding her sodden handkerchief, with terror-stiffened red-nailed fingers. But Tanner still kept his shrewd rugged smile.

"You have heard the evidence," Platt went on. "But let me recite to you once more the long catalogue of crimes, for which this unfortunate creature is

doomed to pay. Let me paint the ugly picture—"

A disturbance interrupted him, in the rear of the courtroom. A newsboy was swiftly passing out papers. Judge Prendick woke and banged indignantly for order, and the sheriff started angrily after the intruding urchin. But then there was a sudden whispering stir among the newspapermen behind Platt, and flash bulbs blazed as he turned bewilderedly. Tanner came heavily to him, with a mocking challenge in his red perpetual smile, and thrust a damp extra into his hands. Platt read the screaming banner:

EX-WIFE ACCUSES D. A.

Mrs. Stella Flanders of Hollywood, former wife of District Attorney Platt, today filed suit in civil court for an accounting of the estate of her deceased father, Murray Staples, who was Platt's law partner before his death ten years ago. Platt was executor of the estate, and Mrs. Flanders alleges that certain bonds, left in trust for her, were never accounted for. She is represented in this action by Tanner & Higgens. Tanner told reporters, this afternoon, that criminal charges against the district attorney are expected to develop from the civil case.

Platt crumpled the paper, in hands turned suddenly numb. Now he understood Tanner's expectant smile. This paper was the *Chronicle*, controlled by the city hall gang. Tanner had seized upon Stella's desperate story and fashioned it into a conscienceless trick to save his client and damage Platt's reputation.

It was a lie. Platt wanted to shout out the truth. But the clock on the wall was only three minutes fast. Its crawling hands came to five twenty-two, and Platt felt a band of agony close around his chest. His protesting voice was choked. He swayed and fell sprawling toward the empty witness box.

Platt knew that he was dying.

Faintly, as he fell, he was aware of mounting confusion in the courtroom. People surged about him, but their excited voices faded swiftly into empty distance. Flash bulbs burned dimly through a gray, thickening haze. Judge Prendick was hammering with an angry gavel, but the sound was somewhere far away. Even Platt's own chill and agony receded. A warm, numbing darkness blotted out all sensation.

But the crisis passed.

Platt could breathe again, and the clammy weakness was gone from his limbs. His head swiftly cleared. Somebody was helping him back to his feet—a trim, worried-looking stranger in gray. They pushed out of the noisy mob in front of the witness box, and the stranger guided him through the open door into the quiet of the empty jury room.

"Why . . . why, thanks," Platt gasped uncertainly. "Must have had a little stroke." He still felt confused and uneasy, and he clung to the gray stranger's arm. "But now I think . . . I feel all right, now."

"Then let's go."

The stranger made a hurried check mark on a little gray card, and put it back in his bulging brief case. He raked lean fingers through his thick dark hair, in a harassed combing gesture that seemed queerly familiar to Platt.

"Your call has come at a rather unfortunate time." Now the worried voice was oddly familiar, too. "We're working under a terrific load." The stranger smiled a quick, one-sided smile—a smile that Platt had known. "But don't be alarmed, William. Of course, the organization will do everything possible for you."

Platt backed against the wall and stared bewilderedly. In spite of the troubled frown, this man looked young and fit. He wore a freshly pressed gray business suit. In the lapel was a curious pin: a tiny broom, made of yellow gold. Platt tried desperately to place him.

"Come, William." He picked up the brief case and jerked his head in a confusing urgent gesture. "What's the matter—don't you know me?"

"I'm sorry." Platt shook his head. "I don't seem able—"

Then his searching eyes found the gold letters stamped on the side of the bulging brief case, *Murray Staples, Deputy Advocate*. He blinked, unbelievingly. He had been a pallbearer at Murray's funeral ten years ago. And the old man had been bald as an onion—but Platt had seen him make that worried gesture to comb back imaginary hair, a thousand times.

"Yes, I was once your partner," Staples told him. "I've been your advocate since I was called." He made an irritated frown. "Now it's time for us to go. I'm afraid your case is going to be a little difficult. You are to appear before Inspector Ballantine, and he is inclined to be severe."

Staples tugged impatiently at his sleeve, but Platt braced his sweat-chilled palms against the wall behind him and continued to stare unbelievingly.

"You've been called, that's all," Staples urged fretfully. "Come along. I'll explain as we go. The organization allows no dawdling."

"But I'm not dead." Platt's voice rose in baffled anger. "I don't *feel*

dead." He discovered, in fact, that all the slowly gathering unease and depression of the last several months had lifted. "I feel remarkably well."

"That's the rule," Staples said. "Our organization demands efficiency, and efficiency demands physical vigor. Come."

"But I can't come now," Platt protested. "Just when Tanner's trying to pull another crooked stunt, to save the Pickens woman. I'll hang her yet. I'll smash Tanner's gang—and his rotten yellow paper. I'll give Stella a lesson she needs."

"I think you've been too harsh with my daughter, William," Staples said sadly. "I tried to persuade you to call her back, today at noon—for both your sakes. But you didn't hear me."

Platt gulped at his astonishment.

"But I did," he whispered. "I mean, I wanted to call her back—I thought it was just a whim of conscience."

"That's what conscience is," Staples told him. "The influence of our organization. You've been my client for ten years, William. I've done my best to guide you. But you were often very deaf."

He looked at the watch on his wrist with an anxious frown.

"Come, or we'll be late at the Station," he urged sharply. "Inspector Ballantine will be annoyed with any delay, and he already has an unfortunate bias against the legal profession."

"I'm not dead," Platt repeated. "I can't believe it."

Staples gestured impatiently toward the open courtroom door. Platt saw uneasily that photographers and jurors and the sheriff were still crowded in front of the witness box. There was something on the floor. He heard somebody calling an ambulance. Then a newspaper reporter snatched the telephone.

"The Call?" His excited words blurred into Platt's mind. "Gimme the desk. . . . Mack, the D. A.'s dead! A darb of a story. He keeled over when he saw the *Chronicle* extra—maybe it ain't all Tanner's imagination. Fuller's got the pix—a honey of Platt falling, with the rag in his hands. Juries being human, this ought to save the Pickens gal her neck. . . . O. K., I'll call back."

Leaning weakly against the wall, Platt caught his breath and tried to get used to the idea. He didn't know what to expect. Actually, he had regarded his church membership as nothing more than a speculative investment, a sort of insurance against an uncertain contingency. Several urgent questions crossed his mind, but he wasn't sure just how to phrase them.

"You see?" Staples' voice was growing sharp with vexation. "Now are you willing to come?"

"I guess I'm dead, all right," Platt admitted heavily.

He peered sharply at his old partner. There was no evidence of any angelic transfiguration. Murray Staples looked as grimly preoccupied as he had always been when an important case was about to go to an unfriendly jury. Faintly apprehensive, Platt inquired:

"What . . . what do you want with me?"

Staples made his hurried, one-sided smile.

"Should have explained," he said hastily. "I had forgotten how confusing this experience was for me. And I heard you affirming your belief in the existence of Heaven and our organization, just a few minutes ago. I suppose I was taking too much for granted."

He frowned at his watch again and swung the heavy brief case nervously as he talked.

"You see, we are no longer in competition. The old rivalry was, no doubt, the natural outcome of a primitive culture; but any such arrangement must be too illogical and inefficient to survive in the modern world. The only practical solution, along the lines of efficient business co-operation, was a merger."

"Merger?" Platt blinked. "Between

Heaven and . . . and your organization?"

"Exactly." Staples made a jerky nod. "Under the new arrangement, we have taken over a great many of the local activities that used to be handled directly from Above. In particular, we have charge of the functions of conscience and securing clearances—the old phrase for these activities was the salvation of souls."

Platt gasped.

"You seem astonished," Staples said. "Yet the arrangement is logical and efficient. We get a higher percentage of first clearances than our competitors ever did—no doubt because our organization has had a great deal of experience in handling the gravest cases.

"Also, our own working conditions are very much improved, under the terms of the merger—especially since the modern labor organizers began to be called, and our organization was forced to accept the union shop. Terms of service are shorter. In fact, our employees have been earning their clearances so rapidly, under the new contract, that the organization is very much understaffed."

Platt nodded slowly, and made an uneasy little chuckle.

"Honoria's going to be surprised!"

"I'm afraid she is," Staples agreed. "Unfortunately, some excellent people are rather upset to discover that our organization is responsible for getting them into Heaven."

"And you, Murray—" Platt hesitated, suddenly afraid that the question would appear in bad taste.

"Yes, my clearance was suspended," Staples told him. "But I hope to earn it, eventually, by securing clearances for my clients. Your case is my first to be called."

"You mean—" Platt gulped. "You're my attorney?"

"The modern term is deputy advocate," Staples said. "I've worked faithfully on your case. I believe it is largely through my influence that you quit playing poker and joined the church." He swung the brief case impatiently. "Now are you willing to come with me?"

"Of course." But Platt licked his dry lips, and swallowed uneasily. "Do you think—" He peered anxiously at Staples. "I mean . . . do you think—"

"Frankly, I wish you hadn't been so deaf to my advice." That harassed combing gesture showed that Staples was worried. "But I haven't had much experience, and it's hard to tell how a case will come out. You see, they're always changing the conditions of admission. Not long ago, for instance, it was practically impossible to clear a woman with bobbed hair; but now, since Veronica Lake, they say you can't clear one who lets it grow. Ready?"

Platt turned back to the jury room door, for a final hasty look across the courtroom. Judge Prendick had recessed the court. Platt had a glimpse of Tanner helping Ysobel Pickens to her feet—and he wished uncomfortably that they had looked a little more sorrowful. Sheriff Dixon was escorting Dr. Venwick down the crowded aisle, followed by two men with a rolled stretcher.

"All right," Platt agreed nervously. "Let's go."

With a hurried nod, Staples touched the little golden broom on his gray lapel. He gripped the brief case, and caught Platt's arm.

"Better watch your step before Ballantine," he warned. "The inspectors are a peculiar type. Mostly former policemen and judges. They've all earned their own clearances—that was stipulated in the contract—but they prefer not to use them. They've found paradise, right here on the job."

Platt felt a sudden nightmarish certainty that his clothing had been left behind, on the courtroom floor. He shivered at the thought of appearing before Inspector Ballantine in nothing at all.

Looking down at himself, however,

he was reassured as well as surprised to discover that he had on a crisp gray business suit, of the same cut and color as Staples'. It struck him, too, that his figure seemed trimmer than it had been for a good many years—the old double-breasted serge would hardly have fitted him now, anyhow.

"A small example of our efficiency," Staples commented. "No doubt you will find customs very different Above. But our organization has adopted a uniform business suit, to be worn by every individual until clearance is secured."

Platt was scarcely aware that they had left the jury room. But now he saw that they were on a wide flight of marble steps, before an impressive building. He supposed that it must stand on the summit of a high mountain, for the steps dropped into cottonlike mist, and white clouds stretched away in a bright, mysterious plain, under a sky turning gloomy with the dusk.

The building might have been designed by Norman Bel Geddes, for some super-colossal Hollywood production. Concealed floodlights painted its facade with garish color, and immense shining letters marched across the central tower, spelling: ETERNITY STATION.

A good many people were hurrying eagerly up the broad, golden-lit stair, and almost as many were hastening feverishly down again. Nearly all the men wore neat gray suits. The women had on uniform dark skirts, but he noticed that femininity had managed to express itself in a variety of bright-colored blouses.

"Come along," Staples urged. "The inspector is inclined to be nasty about any delay."

Platt followed him up the steps, into an immense waiting room. Hurried people were gathering into impatient queues. Many of them, both men and women, were burdened with heavy brief cases, and he supposed that they were devil's advocates—no, the modern term was "deputy"—looking after the interests of their clients.

"There's the ship." Staples made an offhand gesture, but his dry voice held a note of frustrated longing. He took a quick look at his watch. "There's still time for you to catch it—if we get your clearance through."

Platt gasped when he saw the ship, lying immense beyond a long row of guarded turnstiles. It was shaped somewhat like a blimp, but larger and much more substantial. It had a painful silvery shimmer; and some golden emblem, on the side of the hull, was so blindingly brilliant that Platt could not distinguish it. People were filing into the vessel, up long, gayly draped gangways.

Walking briskly, Staples made a wide, hurried gesture.

"All this is new," he said. "Our design. Streamlined for service. Our contract covers everything at this end of the line."

Platt followed him across the vast crowded floor. His whole life since babyhood—at least in theory—had been planned to fit him for this supreme approaching moment. Yet, as it drew near, he felt a shudder of reluctant dread. He squared his shoulders, and tried to quiet his hammering pulse.

Staples stopped outside a frosted glass door which bore a neat brass plate:

Petitions for Clearance
N to R
J. A. Ballantine, Inspector

In a moment the door swung open. Two young men in identical gray emerged hastily, one carrying the brief case of an advocate. He appeared crestfallen, and his client looked pale and shaken.

"Next case," a deep voice boomed. "Eternity *vs.* William Platt."

Staples led the way nervously into a small square office. Inspector Ballantine sat behind a formidable desk, with a telephone at his elbow. He was an immense, bull-necked man, with an ugly

genial face and steel-colored eyes. He took a blue card out of a wire basket, and asked in a too-soft interrogative voice:

"William Platt, attorney, of Clifton? You want a clearance?"

Platt had been expecting to be asked some such question, since he was five years old. Even in early childhood, it had occurred to him that he would like to be a lawyer, so that he might be amply prepared to make his reply as fluent and convincing as possible. Yet now, when the awful question had been put to him at last, he was suddenly unable to utter any sound at all. He was mutely grateful for the presence of his advocate.

"Yes, inspector, this is Mr. Platt." Staples stepped briskly forward, set his bulging brief case on the end of the desk, and took out a thick mass of papers in a blue folder. "Perhaps you remember me, inspector?"

The steel eyes shifted to Staples, and the genial mouth smiled.

"Staples," the inspector recalled briefly. "Ten years ago. Clearance suspended—matter of bonds in trust. What progress are you making?"

Staples fumbled with his papers, visibly nervous.

"My first case, inspector."

"Good luck," Ballantine said curtly. "Proceed."

"My client's record." Staples pushed the blue folder across the table. "In full for the ten years that I have been his advocate, with a summary of his previous record from the files of our organization."

The inspector riffled hastily through the onion-skin pages. Staples caught his breath, and went on in a voice slightly too loud:

"You will see that Mr. Platt was a useful and respected citizen, a church member in good standing and a frequent contributor to worthy charities. He proved an enemy of evil in every guise. He was elected to the office of district attorney on a reform ticket, and only his calling prevented him from carrying out his campaign promise of a general clean-up."

The inspector nodded and referred to his blue card again.

"Our own records show that the petitioner was exceptionally zealous in his attac upon what he regarded as evil," he softly. "Yet I find that we have th very grave charges against him."

Staples raked a worried hand through his hair. He started to say something, thought better of it, and began nervously snapping and opening the catch of his brief case. The inspector paralyzed him with an annoyed steel glance.

Platt suddenly wanted to sit down. He looked uneasily about for a chair, and found none. Above the desk he discovered a sign which exhorted, *Don't Delay Eternity*. He waited uncomfortably. Ballantine read from the blue

card, in his restrained velvet voice:

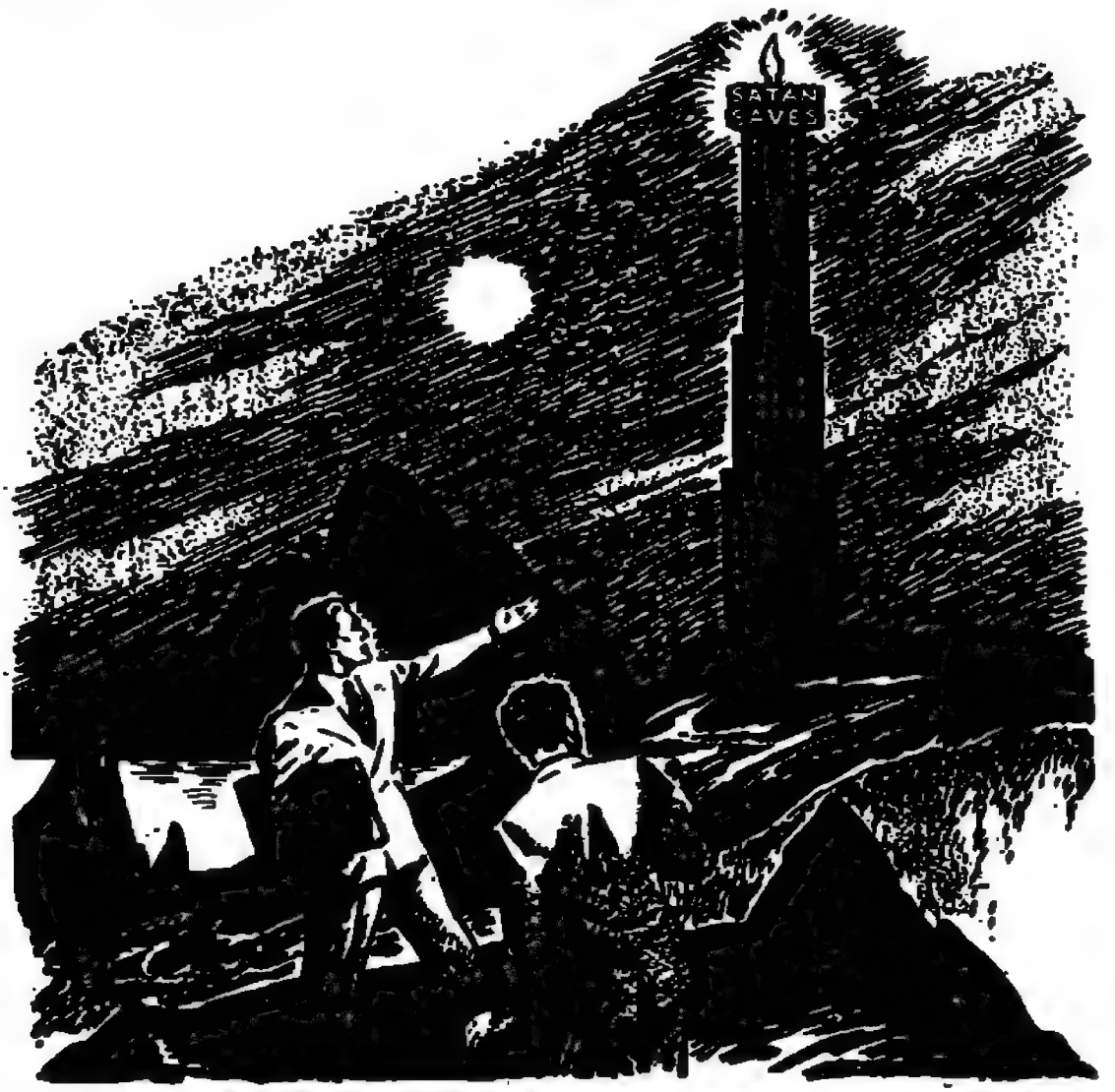
"The first charge dates from nearly twenty years ago, when the petitioner had just begun his law practice in Clifton. In one of his first cases—a civil action involving the ownership of forty rods of fence—he was opposed by another young attorney. He lost the case, through perjury. But he was later able to prove that his legal opponent had suborned the witnesses in the case, and he caused him to be suspended from the bar.

"The other lawyer was a young and able man. He might otherwise have enjoyed a distinguished and useful career. That suspension, however, denied to him for several years his right to the honorable practice of his chosen profession, and he was driven into crooked politics. Arthur Tanner is now a man whose clearance will be difficult."

"Tanner?" Platt suddenly found an indignant voice. "Why, inspector, that man's a worthless and conscienceless crook. I've fought him for twenty years. Why, he broke up my first marriage. And it was another dirty dishonest trick that caused my . . . er, calling."

The steel eyes were ruthless.

"Nevertheless, the petitioner is responsible."



"My client is overwrought." Staples was hovering uneasily. "Please overlook this outburst."

"Here is a second damaging act." Ballantine consulted his blue card again. "Ten years ago, the petitioner employed an office girl. He soon discovered that she had taken a small sum of money from the office cash. He discharged her, and reported her error to a business bureau in the city.

"This girl was attractive and intelligent and she might otherwise have found a successful business career. Because of the petitioner's act, however, she was unable to obtain other honest employment and she became a criminal. At our latest report, Ysobel Pickens was on trial for murder. She will be very hard to clear."

"I remember—I thought she looked familiar." Platt caught his breath. "Her name was Ann Pickens, then. She took seven dollars to buy a party dress. She was frightened when I accused her. She cried and promised to put the money back on pay day." He looked into Ballantine's steel eyes and his voice rose protestingly. "But that was such a small thing, inspector—and it happened so long ago."

"The consequences were not small," Ballantine said softly. "The petitioner is responsible."

He picked up the blue card again.

"The third charge is still more grave," he went on ominously. "Some nine years ago, the petitioner married. His wife was younger than he. She had tastes and whims of which he disapproved. Eventually—and that as a result of his severe and uncompromising attitude—she was guilty of an act for which he divorced her.

"This woman was beautiful and gifted and she might otherwise have been a loyal wife and a noble mother. As a consequence of the petitioner's acts, however, Stella Flanders has by now accumulated charges against her record which make her clearance very doubtful."

"Stella?" Platt swallowed an angry breath. "She tried to blackmail me out of a thousand dollars, just today. And she cooked up a malicious libel about me for Tanner's yellow newspaper."

"But you are responsible." Inspector Ballantine's velvet voice had become inexorable. "Now you have heard the charges against you. You have the right to speak. William Platt, is there any reason why you should not be remanded to Hell, so that you may atone for these acts?"

Platt started. Cold sweat sprang out on his forehead. His voice was gone again and he could find no answer. He looked to his advocate in mute appeal. But Staples made a nervous shrug, as if to show that he could do nothing, and began to gather up his papers. Ballantine cleared his throat and said heavily:

"The petitioner fails to answer. Clearance suspended."

Platt wasn't sure just what the words implied, but their ominous ring made him feel a little ill. He clutched the edge of the desk, with weak, clammy fingers, and helplessly watched Staples replace the papers in his brief case.

Inspector Ballantine banged a rubber stamp down on the blue card and tossed it into another tray. He nodded impatiently at the sign over his head and picked up another card and boomed at the door:

"Next case. Eternity *vs.* Martha Potts."

Numb and shaken, Platt followed his advocate out of the inspector's tiny office as Martha Potts came in. She was a large colored woman, still smelling faintly of laundry soap, accompanied by a dapper Negro advocate in gray. Her chocolate face was beaming, and she greeted him with a joyous:

"Hallelujah, brother!"

Platt looked despondently across the immense waiting room. Beyond the guarded gates, the elect were still streaming up into that mighty refulgent ship. He caught a distant, haunting

chord of celestial music. Slowly, with a cold, sick feeling in his middle, he turned to follow Staples back toward the stair.

"What happens to me now?" he inquired uneasily.

Staples made a sympathetic clucking sound.

"I know how you feel, William. It's depressing to be turned back, I know. But you'll soon find your niche in our organization. Clients will be assigned to you. If you manage to clear them, your own clearance will be issued at once. If you fail, the contract provides for earning credit by office work, but that's a rather tedious process." He chuckled with a hollow cheer. "They say the first thousand years are the longest."

As a joke, that was not successful.

"Of course"—Staples tried to be encouraging—"it is possible to appeal, if you aren't satisfied with the ruling. But you must consider that the motion might be denied. Then some of your own clients might come up before Ballantine in the future—and he is inclined to be nasty about appeals!"

Platt couldn't think of anything worth saying. He turned back for a final hopeless look at the long shining ship beyond the gates. Staples waited impatiently and at last he came on with dragging feet.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I mean . I suppose it would have counted toward your own clearance, if I had got through?"

"Never mind." Staples made a wry, one-sided grin. "You did very well, for a lawyer." He looked at his watch, and raked worried fingers through his hair. "Come along—we're already overdue at the office."

They had come back upon the broad marble steps, golden under the floodlights, that dropped into that bright mysterious ocean of moonlit cloud. Staples touched the little golden broom on his lapel, and once more took Platt's arm.

Then they were standing on a sharp volcanic spur in the midst of a bleak landscape that fitted Platt's idea of Death Valley. The high moon shimmered on white lakes of salt. Dark eroded mountains rose jagged and treeless beyond. Grotesque lava shapes were black with the stain of fire, but Platt shivered a little from a penetrating chill in the air.

"I'll take a moment to show you our new office building." Staples pointed, and his voice had a ring of pride. "Just completed. You'll find it the last word in modern business efficiency."

Platt turned to look, and his mouth fell slack. A tremendous gray skyscraper towered startlingly out of a black lava flow. Lighted windows drew his eyes up, floor on floor, to a red torch that burned luridly on a lofty tower. Tall crimson letters, along the cornice, flashed, SATAN SAVES.

Staples touched the golden broom again, and they were upon a wide, crowded sidewalk outside the building—only now, strangely enough, the skyscraper was somehow squeezed into the heart of Clifton. For he recognized the *Chronicle* office, across the dusky street; and he could read a familiar sign in flaking gold letters on a second-story window:

Staples & Platt
Attorneys at Law

Staples was already tugging at his sleeve. But he paused again, for a glimpse of the deep-carved inscription on the tower's massive cornerstone:

Erected, 1941
Central Office, American Division,
HADES
(High Administration of Development, Education, and Salvation)
A. Lucifer, Manager

Staples pulled him into a torrent of worried, hurried men and women, all burdened with heavy brief cases, and

they were swept into a foyer of cold-looking chromium and glass, surrounding a huge illuminated terrestrial globe. They were fighting toward the elevators, when Staples stopped with a gasp of awe.

"There's the manager!" he whispered. "I heard that he was coming today, but I didn't hope to see him. He is going to address a convention of vice presidents."

A tall man in black hurried across the lobby in front of them, flanked by two or three nervous subordinates in identical gray. His sleek-combed hair was gray at the temples, and thinning. He wore the overconfident, extravert smile of a good bond salesman or a successful evangelist. Platt heard one of the subordinates murmur, too heartily:

"Yes, Mr. Lucifer. Yes, sir!"

The party went by. Staples broke out of his awed paralysis, and dragged Platt into a crowded automatic elevator. It shot them to the ninety-eighth floor. Staples pushed through a door lettered

District V-913

and stopped to punch a time clock.

They came into a long immense room, flooded with a merciless glare from fluorescent bulbs. An endless corridor separated two rows of fenced-in desks. Gray-clad men and uniformed girls were furiously busy, and the din of their activities made Platt want to cover his ears.

Typewriters clattered and telephones jangled. Teletypes, card sorters, dictographs, bookkeeping machines, all added their bit to the general pandemonium. Tense-faced men in gray shouted at flustered stenographers. Office boys darted here and there.

Platt bravely tried to grin, and called at Staples:

"Well, this isn't Heaven!"

But Staples didn't hear. He ran to touch the elbow of a hastening man with a white carnation in his buttonhole. Platt recognized him: Justice Bonafax, a former member of the State supreme bench, notorious for the undeviating uprightness of his decisions.

"Chief, Mr. Platt," Staples gasped hastily. "He's with us, from today. Mr. Bonafax is nine-hundred-and-thirteenth vice president, in charge of our district office."

"Glad to have you, Mr. Platt." Bonafax hastily pumped his hand. "Hades needs more men like you. I want you to feel that our whole organization is just one big, happy family, Mr. Platt. The staff will make you feel at home. And don't forget our district slogan, *Service First.*"

He turned quickly to Staples.

"Oh, Mr. Staples, I have good news for you. I understand that you are going to continue with the organization indefinitely, now. Of course, that means that you will be transferred to office work—although you will be allowed time to carry on the necessary field work in behalf of your remaining clients. You will be glad to know that we have an unusual opening ready for you. Mr. Bishop got his clearance today, and you will take his place as manager of Section R. Mr. Platt will begin under you."

"Thank you, Mr. Bonafax." Staples' voice was too warmly grateful. "This is a splendid opportunity, and I'm going to try to make the most of it."

Bonafax slapped his back.

"You see, Mr. Platt," he beamed, "we're all just one great big happy family. Mr. Staples, see that you don't neglect our service slogan." He jerked out a watch. "Now I've got to run, to catch the convention. The manager's here, himself, to give us a pep talk."

He hurried on toward the elevators and Staples guided Platt down the busy aisle, through the pandemonium of strained voices and clattering machines. Near the end of the immense room, a low barrier surrounded Section R—which was one large desk, facing a dozen smaller ones.

Two or three girls were typing furiously, at the smaller desks. A teletype machine clanked and whirred. A man in gray was frowning in baffled concentration over a bulky mimeographed document, which looked to Platt as if it might have been compiled for the regulation of something or other by one of the alphabetical agencies in Washington.

"Here we are, William."

Staples pointed to one of the smaller desks. A little bronze plaque on it was already neatly lettered:

WILLIAM PLATT
DEPUTY ADVOCATE

Paper, pencils, clips, and erasers were arranged in neat little stacks. The letter tray held a new brief case, with his name stamped on it.

"That's efficiency." Staples had seen his surprise. "Our employees have no time to waste." He pinned a little golden broom into Platt's gray lapel. "This is your badge of 'Service First' and your means of transportation about your strictly business duties—you are not permitted to use it for joyriding."

Against the endless rush of sound, he shouted at the nearest busy girl, a thin peroxide blonde abstractedly chewing gum.

"Miss Hamlett! This is our new Mr. Platt." She looked up briefly, with a vague dreamy nod—as if her inner mind still dwelt upon the robust charms of Clark Gable. "Miss Hamlett will take your reports."

"Call me Mabel." Her voice was a listless nasal drawl. She looked back at her propped-up notebook and her red-nailed fingers never paused or faltered in their furious tattoo upon her keyboard.

"Your assignment should be here, William," Staples said. "I'll check the teletype."

Platt sat down at the neat new desk, and began to chew the eraser off a freshly sharpened pencil. He felt bewildered and despondent. The noise and hurry and tension of these vast offices gave him a bitter nostalgia for the small-town quiet of Clifton.

"I know it ain't Heaven, Mr. Platt." The nasal blonde laid a small yellow card on his desk. "But keep your chin up. You ain't the only one. Look at me—a five-strike, all over a no-good palooka that didn't care two cents about me."

"Thanks, Miss . . . Mabel."

Platt tried to smile. After all, the activities of a deputy advocate might prove to have a certain interest. And, if he had good luck with his clients, he might soon be out of this altogether. He remembered that bright mysterious ship, with a dull ache of longing.

"Here's your assignment, Mr. Platt, just off the teletype."

Platt took up the card, and read the names of his new clients. He shivered. The yellow oblong blurred. He couldn't breathe. The office din broke over him, in overwhelming waves of sound.

"What's the matter?" Hovering sympathetically, Mabel forgot her gum. "D'they hand you tough ones?"

"I'm afraid they did." Platt's voice came shaken and husky. "I couldn't get these people past Inspector Ballantine, in a thousand years." He looked hopefully toward the section manager's desk, where Staples was now surrounded with madly clamoring telephones. "Is there . . . can I get the assignments changed?"

"Not a chance." Mabel shook her thin peroxide locks. "They hand you a line about efficiency and office discipline. No, Mr. Platt, you just gotta take what they give you." She shrugged her narrow shoulders, philosophically. "After all, this ain't Heaven."

"I see it isn't." Platt said heavily. He read the yellow card again:

OFFICE MEMO

TO: William Platt, Deputy Advocate
CLIENTS ASSIGNED: Ysobel Pickens, Stella Flanders, and Arthur Tanner

THE END.

Heaven Is What You Make It

by Malcolm Jameson

She was a very determined woman. She was determined to fight in battle—and did, and died. And thereafter—she was determined to make the heaven she was misdirected to suit her—

Illustrated by Kelliher

I.

Commodore Sir Reginald Wythe-Twombley, R. N., D. S. O., et cetera, sighed deeply and twisted unhappily at his gray mustaches. Damn these strong-minded women—especially the American variety. Why do they persist in pushing their noses in where only men belong?

"Well?" she demanded. She did not tap her foot, or plant her hands on her hips. It was unnecessary. That "well" contained both. And a lot else.

The harried commodore sighed again. As if he didn't have trouble enough already. He could only suppose she had done it that way in London, too. How else could she have obtained that absurd letter from the minister? Yet he had to dispose of her.

"But, my dear," he protested, "after all! As a nurse, now, or a lorry driver that would be practicable. But to go into a Commando unit as just . . . just . . . why—"

"The letter is clear," she reminded him, icily.

She stood there, imperturbable and determined. She was big for a woman—a darkish blonde with cool gray eyes and a chin that might have been chiseled out of granite. Her passport gave her age as thirty-three. It may really have been that, but she was of the type that did not suggest queries as to age. Her most salient characteristic was competence. She fairly oozed efficiency at every pore.

The commodore coughed.

"It happens"—he tried to hedge—"that . . . uh . . . there are none of our units in the Orkneys just now. Of course, if you are very insistent about it, you could wait here at Kirkwall, but I assure you you would be more comfortable in . . . well, Edinburgh, let us say."

"What about the *Tordenskjold?*" she asked, with a firmness that reminded him painfully of a former governess. "I understand it is about to raid the

Vigten Islands and Namsos Fjord."

"Quite so," he admitted, grudgingly. At least she seemed to be well informed. "But it is officered and manned entirely by Norwegians, Danes and Frisians. You would not—"

"I speak all the Scandinavian languages fluently," she said, coolly. "Moreover, to save you your next remark, I might remind you that I have been principal of a school in the Gowanus Canal section of Brooklyn for the past ten years. I've handled roughnecks and hoodlums beside which even your dreaded Nazis are gentle. As for these fine men who will be my comrades— Well!"

The commodore surrendered. He hated to do it, for the *Tordenskjold* was going on something very much like a suicide mission, but he reached for a pad of blank chits. He scribbled a few lines on it, and then his initials. He felt himself a weakling; for the first time in many years, in taking the easy way out with this woman. But she still stood there, unmoved, looking at him and waiting. Then he called his orderly.

"Have the cart out," he told the marine, "and take Miss . . . Miss—"

"Miss Ida Simpkins," she supplied, without a quiver of an eyelid or a trace of thanks.

"Er, Miss Simpkins," continued the commodore, "to the dock at the North Anchorage in the Flow. Put her in the Norwegians' boat and then return."

The marine saluted, and picked up Miss Simpkins' bag.

She sat stonily beside the driver all the way, looking neither right nor left. Once or twice the driver attempted conversation, but he spoke a strange archaic language that was neither Scandinavian, Scotch nor yet Gaelic. The marine sat moodily in the back of the cart with the bag for company. Like his superior, he sighed, too, from time to time, for he was a veteran of the last war and knew that such things as this had never happened on earth or in heaven before.

The *kommandör-kaptein* of the quaint old cruiser received her with more equanimity than any other military man she had encountered since her strange quest began—the Saturday after Pearl Harbor. He merely read her papers through, asked three crisp questions, and assigned her to duty. She was to be the bridge messenger on the starboard watch. She was told where she could sleep and eat, and that was all there was about it. Dusk was already at hand, and shortly the old ship and the destroyer *Garm* would be stealing out through Hoxa Gate. Tomorrow promised to be foggy, so that under its cover they might possibly reach their destination after all. It was on those things the captain was thinking, not on the unorthodox addition to his crew.

It was early in the evening of the next day that they began to close with the rugged land. The mists had held and the sea had been calm. Except for a heavy ground swell that made the vessel wallow constantly, the voyage had had no outstanding feature. The men, grim-faced and ready, and bundled up in heavy clothes, stood always by their guns, which were loaded and trained outboard for anything that might loom suddenly on their beam.

It was just at seven bells it happened. The fog had been thicker for the past half-hour, when suddenly it lifted. A scant three miles away a large ship was charging along, throwing spray over her bridge at every swell she met. Its silhouette was unmistakable. She was a Nazi cruiser. In another instant the guns of all three ships were blazing.

The little *Garm* looked as if she would capsize, as she heeled under hard-over rudder and full speed to make her torpedo attack, but her larger consort clung doggedly to the old course. After that first moment, nothing was very clear. Geyserlike splashes bloomed suddenly close aboard, with deafening noise as the sensitive shells exploded on contact with the water. Spray showered the

ship, and in it were deadly shell fragments. The *löitnant* of the watch received one such in his left eye and another in the knee. He fell to the deck with a brief groan.

"Get Fenrik Jansen," he muttered. "Quickly."

Miss Simpkins ran aft to where she knew he would be, by the 5.9" battery control station. But just as she was well clear of the bridge, another salvo struck. That one was a fair straddle, and many things happened, fore and aft. The bridge went up in a fountain of flame, smoke and splinters, and with it the captain and the wounded lieutenant of the watch. The after turret spouted fire heavenward, which meant it had been penetrated and whatever powder was exposed ignited. It was clear that the minutes left to the faithful old warship were numbered.

Miss Simpkins sprang to the nearest broadside gun, where she saw the trainer—a mere boy—sagging in his saddle. She embraced him with capable arms and lifted him out; then laid him gently on the deck. Half his head was gone. After that she climbed quietly into the place she had thus vacated, and grabbed the handles of the training gear. She flattened her face against the buffer of the sight and found the Nazi cruiser. She tried the handles, and found that by turning them this way and that, she could bring the vertical crosswire she saw inside the telescope so that it would be in alignment with the German's principal mast. She supposed that that was the idea, so she held it there, though every few seconds the gun beside her would go off with a snapping bark that nearly caved in her eardrums. Moreover, it jolted her to her very skeleton as it lashed backward in its recoil, and the muzzle blast smote her from head to foot.

But she clung on, doing her bit as she saw it—saw bright blossom after bright blossom flower on the hated enemy's side, and saw the orange ripple of flame that marked his return of the compliment. She knew from the acrid smoke that drifted past her own nostrils that her own ship was afire, but she noted with grim delight that so was that of the Nazis. For an instant she got a glimpse of the sinking destroyer, itself blazing from stem to stern. And then she saw the vast explosion that rent the German. She saw that instantaneous blot against the sky, shot through with flame, and knew it was the *Garm's* last torpedo that must have done it, for suddenly she realized that her own gun had been silent for fully a minute now.

Indeed, there was no sound whatever about her, except the wild hiss of escaping steam and the crackling of flame. There was an almost inaudible moaning somewhere in the murk, but not the boom of cannon. She slid off her seat and looked about her. All she could see through blistering smoke were the legs of a dead man lying directly behind the gun. That would be one of the loaders. Then something struck the ship a blow that shook it as if it had hit a rock at full speed. Almost in the same instant there was a concussion of such stupendous violence that Miss Simpkins had only the vaguest impression of it. She only knew she was being hurled upward and outward. The dying Nazi must have delivered its own torpedo as its swan song—that was her only thought.

She was very numb about the whole thing. It had all happened so quickly, and she had been utterly unprepared. She did know, though, that she had done her best, and hoped it had helped. She was starting to fall then, and wondered how it would feel to drown. Or did it matter?

It was then that what she thought was her delirium started. There was a jumble of wildly mounting music, queer triolets that reminded her somehow of Wagner and grand opera—though it must have been from a record she had heard somewhere, since she thought opera both sinful and a waste of time and money. There was a distant, but approaching chorus of voo-

hooing—*"Yohoho!o, yohoho!o, aiaha!"* it went. Last of all she saw the horses! A cavalry charge from the skies! Dozens of galloping horses were bearing down on her, and on each was mounted a fierce Amazon, armored and helmeted and waving a spear and yelling at the top of her lungs.

"So death is like this," thought Miss Ida Simpkins, bitterly, "and I always supposed it would be angels who would come; not heathen apparitions."

She was not far from the water by then. The dark waves were rushing up to meet her. It was at that moment that a great white charger swooped beneath her and a strong left arm swept her into its embrace. It was a woman's arm, and snowy white, and in the next instant Miss Simpkins felt herself pressed against two breasts incased in golden chain mail. They were zooming upward next, and the Amazon rider of the horse, a powerful woman with honey-colored hair, was bending forward to kiss her.

"No, NO!" screamed Miss Simpkins, fighting fiercely at her.

But it was of no use. The warrior blonde's full red lips were against hers, full of tender kiss. Miss Simpkins tried one final struggle, but to no avail. She was in cool darkness now. There was no woman, no horse, no ocean—nothing. And Miss Simpkins knew exactly what that meant. Ida Simpkins was *dead*.

In blackness there is no sense of time. Who knows? Perhaps there really is no time. Nor was there time in the gray stage that followed. It was a formless sort of gray, like the inside of a cloud, where there is nothing overhead or beneath or to any side. But Ida Simpkins had a kind of awakening. She was aware of herself again. She was capable of memory, and thought, and even reasoning. It puzzled her, was she dead, or wasn't she? Maybe she had been picked up and was merely sick. Or could it be that all her ideas of the hereafter were not exactly correct after all. Perhaps this was a transition stage of some sort.

For her ideas of the hereafter had always been most definite. It was a thing that had interested her profoundly, and she had been wicked enough—though a devout and unyielding Methodist—to read the outrageous beliefs of all the pagans, and even the mistaken views of some of the other sects of her own general faith. There was nothing in any of it that resembled this endless grayness. It was tedious, maddeningly monotonous.

She tried thinking about her past; of her strict upbringing, and how steadfastly she had always hewed to the line. She remembered well those days of schoolteaching in blighted districts, of physical instruction, and of having to learn not only boxing and wrestling, but jujitsu, so as to be able to handle the tough boys she taught. All that seemed so long ago now, though in reality it could have been but a few months. For her martial career had been a short one. One brief day, to be precise, leaving out of account the two months' battle she had had to get the opportunity to die the way she did.

Ida Simpkins had always been a profound pacifist. It was one of her many strict ideals. Smoking, drinking and gambling were wrong to her because they were injurious and wasteful, as well as sinful. Fighting and war were wrong for the same reasons, except that war embraced all the vices on such a grand scale as to be the most hateful of them all. The rape of Europe and China had offended her sense of propriety, but she had entertained the feeling that those crimes were foreign affairs. That in a sense it was due punishment for their own foul crimes. Were not the Chinese pagans? Were not the French and Viennese notoriously loose-lived? All right-thinking persons knew those things.

It was war for America that she was

against. The draft was wrong, any preparation was wrong, since it implied the recognition of that which should be firmly denied. It was Pearl Harbor that jolted her out of that beautiful but impractical belief. It was late that Sunday when she first heard of it, and all that night she lay in harrowing combat with herself. Must one fight, or should one turn the other cheek? Ida Simpkins was in a dreadful dilemma. For she was a good Christian, as she understood the term, but when it came to the cheek-turning business she was notoriously stiff-necked. Her struggle with herself went on through that night and the next and next. It was nearly dawn on Wednesday when she arrived at her decision. At that moment she threw pacifism overboard and went all out for belligerency. Thereafter, she practiced it with all the fanatical ferver she applied to her other ideals.

It was not until Saturday of the same week that she penetrated the last barrier and came face to face with one of the Powers That Be. Sorry, no, they told her in Washington, but we have no battalion of death—not yet. Maybe there will be a Woman's Auxiliary Service later, something on the order of what the British have, but that is a long way off. That was enough for her. She wangled a passport and managed to get to England. There she pestered an already overburdened War Ministry until she got the coveted letter she sprang on the bewildered commodore at Kirkwall. She battered down his defenses. She got to the front. And now—now the war was over, as far as she was concerned.

She quickly tired of memories, being no introvert. The perpetual grayness began to pall on her. Was it going to be like this all Eternity? She had a wholesome respect for Eternity. Eternity was a long time, and one should arrange his life so that it would be spent in reasonable comfort. She remembered all that from a very long way back, and had faithfully followed the rules taught her. Was this interminable grayness to be the reward?

But she was in the beginnings of awareness of other things than mere featureless grayness. There was a sense of physical contact, of lying jackknified face down on a moving something. As her senses became acuter, her impressions became clearer. She was lying across something short-haired and warm, and it had a detestable horsy smell. She could feel muscles and bones working beneath her, and then she knew that she was nearly naked. All that she had on were her panties, and a firm hand held them by the seat in a tight grip.

This is madness, she thought at first, until her dying dream began slowly to piece itself together again in her consciousness. But what troubled her most just then was the sense of being undressed. In her dazed and buffeted condition while at the trainer's seat at the gun, she had not noticed that the blast of every shot or every nearby bursting shell had blown some garment to shreds and entirely off her. All that was left, apparently, were the panties. But those, thank goodness, were durable—being, as they were, heavy knitted bloomers. But what was she doing face down on the shoulders of a galloping horse, and who was it holding her on? Then the dream stood forth in perfect clarity. That woman—*ugh!*

Ida Simpkins opened her eyes and squirmed. All she could see was the plunging shoulder of the horse and a white human leg from the knee down. It was a naked leg—like her own, only plumper, or perhaps beefier would be the word. Ida clawed at the charging horse and tried to get upright, to slide off behind—anything. It was disgraceful for her to be in this grotesque pose—her, Ida Simpkins, formerly mistress of Gowanus Settlement House! Who did this so-and-so who had kidnaped her think she was, anyhow?

But the so-and-so's grip was unbreak-

able. However, she quickly shifted it to an embrace, and before Miss Simpkins knew what was happening, she had been picked up, upended, whirled about, and set astride the horse facing her captor.

"Hail, hero! Yo-*ho!*" shouted the beefy blonde. I'm Brynhild—"

Her mouth dropped open and Ida thought for a moment she was going to fall off the horse. The horse seemed to sense something, for it slowed its mad gallop to an easier pace.

"Y-y-you're a woman!" gasped the Valkyrie, as if the utmost in sacrilege had been done. "How did I get hold of—"

"Of course I'm a woman," snapped Miss Simpkins.

"But it was a ship full of Norse heroes," protested the Valkyrie, "fighting against odds. Me and my girls—"

"My girls and *I*," corrected Miss Simpkins, firmly.

"My girls and I were watching from afar," continued Brynhild, still so taken aback by the scandalous error she seemed to have committed that she accepted the reproof meekly. "You were the last survivor, serving nobly at a gun and surrounded by raging flames. The ship blew up and you went up with it. I gathered you up in fragments as you rained down. It might have been better if I had had a bucket. I must have mixed things up—somehow."

She finished lamely, and shook her head dazedly. War in the good old days was not like this. All you had to do then was gather up a spare arm or ear or so, and maybe a head, and you had *all* your hero—and nothing else. The way things were going now, a poor battle maiden never knew what she was getting.

"So what?" Miss Simpkins wanted to know, entirely unmoved by Brynhild's discomfiture. "What am I being taken for a ride for? Why did you horn in on my affairs, anyway?"

"Because," explained the badly rattled daughter of Wotan, "I thought you were a Norse hero, and should be taken to Valhalla along with the others. See them—over there? And Bifröst ahead? The bridge that only gods and heroes may cross?"

Miss Simpkins looked, blinked and looked again. Sure enough, a whole squadron of cavalry was charging along their flanks, each steed with a Valkyrie and a sailor astride. She had to twist her head to see the bridge, but there it was, unmistakably—a great, glorious rainbow that had thickness as well as breadth, rearing itself above the clouds they rode upon.

Brynhild did not look happy.

"Were you really a warrior," she asked, finally, "or did I make a terrible mistake? According to the Law, no

woman has, or ever will, set foot within Asgard."

"I was aiming a gun," replied Miss Simpkins sharply, "if that's what you mean by being a warrior. By the way, how long have I been dead?"

"A long, long time," answered Brynhild, cryptically, "and in the other direction."

Ida Simpkins thought that over. Dead a long time, huh, and headed for Valhalla! She knew her mythology, having studied it and taught it to the tough brats of Red Hook. Up to this moment everything was regular—providing only she were ancient Norse. There was the business of death in battle, the death kiss of the Valkyrie, and the translation to Valhalla. That, she knew, lay just over the bridge that was close ahead. It was a rowdy place, as she recalled it, but—

"If you hadn't been so darned hasty," reproached Miss Simpkins, with considerable acidity, "my own people would have got me. As it is, I don't know how to get back. I guess we'll have to go on now, even if it breaks your old law. It's a fool law anyway. I'm *not* going back to the gray place, I can tell you that, sister."

"We'll see what Heimdall says," said the Valkyrie, in some dejection. "He's the guardian of the bridge."

Ida Simpkins said nothing, but squirmed around so as to face the way the charger was going. The whole situation was bitterly clear now. It was a tough break to die and get taken to the wrong heaven through someone's clumsy interference, but if that was the way it was to be, so it was to be. At least, before she made any hasty decisions, she meant to look the place over and see what possibilities it had. It might be a sinful thing to spend Eternity in a heathen heaven, but who knew? There might be a purpose behind it.

That was the sweet, consoling thought that sustained her. Didn't missionaries spend their lifetime among the benighted heathen? She could not but be thrilled. Come to think of it, had *any* missionary *ever* penetrated so deeply into the territory of the misguided and the nonbeliever? She saw a great mission ahead, and the light of battle came into her cold gray eyes and the granite mouth set itself on the old familiar lines. On to Valhalla! Ida Simpkins' work had just begun!

II.

The passage of Bifröst was a truly nerve-shaking experience. The frail but beautiful bridge quivered, swayed and bucked under the thunderous hoofs of the cavalcade bearing the honored dead. Ida looked down once only and gasped. The bridge was built of nothingness—a curious web of interwoven strands of fire and air and water. Its dazzling iridescence was almost more than human eye could bear.

Then they were at the summit of the great bow. Brynhild's steed, and the others following, slowed and came to a halt at what appeared to be a tollgate barring the road. At the right was a gold-plated shack, set upon a bracket extending out over an abyss so deep that Miss Simpkins dared not think about it. By the side of the door hung a huge trumpet. In the door stood a tall, fair young man in silvery armor. That must be Heimdall, keeper of the bridge and chief greeter of the fallen heroes.

He stepped out and unlatched the gate.

"You did well, Brynhild," he remarked, making a sign for the rest of the cavalcade to pass. "This will prove the greatest hero of them all. I have sharp eyes and ears, you know, and can see and hear for thousands of miles and thousands of years. This is a day that will never be forgotten in Valhalla."

Miss Simpkins compressed her lips still more firmly. That was just what *she* was thinking. But as she looked down at herself, it annoyed her to be in her present state of dishabille. She yearned for more adequate covering than

the gray panties, useful though they were. Heimdall must have read the thought, for he entered his golden shack and at once reappeared with an armful of cloth and glittering hardware.

"With the compliments of Alberich, King of the Dwarfs," he said, bowing. "Magic has been worked into these garments. While they are intact, no man can harm you."

"Intact or not intact," snapped Miss Simpkins, "just let one try!"

But she snatched at them and, although it irked her to dress herself by the side of a public road with a flock of leering dead seamen galloping by, she managed to get the outfit on, though Brynhild had to help her with some of the straps and buckles. By the time the job was finished, she was rigged out in a style similar to that affected by the Valkyries, except that she was given a short sword instead of a spear.

"But what will papa say?" asked the worried Brynhild.

"Ah," smiled the ever-agreeable Heimdall. "I wonder."

Brynhild helped Ida mount, much to the latter's annoyance, but she found she could not manage herself very well in the cumbersome gold armor. Then they thundered on in the wake of the other heroes, hearing a gentle farewell toot of Heimdall's horn as they left.

They galloped down the other half of the bridge and into the shimmering, gold-leaved grove called Glasir. Even the ultra-practical Miss Simpkins was impressed by it, for it was all it was cracked up to be, not like the fabulous "palace" Heimdall was reputed to have atop the bridge. After a little they came out onto an extensive flat place. Ida Simpkins' reaction was that she had entered a vast airdrome, for the field was large enough to accommodate the armies of the world, and beyond stood an immense building that could easily have housed a score of Zeppelins. But she knew from its silvery, fluted walls, and the roof of overlapping golden shields that it must be the great hall of Valhalla. Distant as they still were from it, she could hear the resounding cheers of the old-timers as they hailed the newcomers. Ida Simpkins tightened herself for the coming fray, for she intended to take no nonsense from any of them, not even Wotan himself.

"Don't forget," cautioned Brynhild, icily, for she was heartily sick of her find, "that when papa presides over the veterans, he styles himself Valfather."

"It's all one to me," said Miss Simpkins, indifferently. She firmly resolved never to board another horse again without at least thick stockings on. This one shed horribly and she knew the insides of her bare legs were plastered with white felt.

They rode in through a portal that would have admitted a battleship, and straight up through an aisle made through a mob of howling, armored men—huge, beefy, red-faced men, all of them, many with red or yellow beards and drooping walrus mustaches. On a dais far ahead, stood a spare man in armor, wearing a winged helmet. As they drew nearer, Ida could make out the missing eye. Yes, that was the Valfather.

Just before the throne, the horse stopped abruptly, and Ida slid off—over its neck and head. She got up crimson, furious with Brynhild, the horse, and herself. But neither Wotan nor Brynhild were looking at her.

"Another Valkyrie?" Wotan was asking, looking a little baffled. "My memory seems to have slipped. Really, I must see Mimir soon. Who was her mother, and in what country did she live? Perhaps I may recall the incident."

Miss Simpkins was not to be put upon. Before Brynhild could answer she spoke up for herself.

"I'm *not* a Valkyrie. Catch me traipsing all over the country picking up strange men, and dead ones at that! And you can't make me wait on tables here, either. It may be a technicality,

but I'm a hero, and as such I want my rights."

"A hero?" asked the Valfather, dumfounded, rolling his one good eye solemnly from first one of them to the other.

"That's what *I* thought," said Brynhild, defiantly, "and that's what Heimdall says. He let her across the bridge. That's something."

"Oh, dear," said the Valfather, anxiously. "Those Norns are holding out on me again. Why didn't I know about this before?"

Miss Simpkins could think of nothing appropriately tart to say to that. Nor did she care to. For she was beginning to relax a little and there was something about the bewildered old man that appealed to her. He seemed so good, yet so utterly impractical. She regarded him for a moment with speculative eyes. A man like that had possibilities—salvage possibilities, that is. Under firm management, he might eventually amount to something. At the moment, he seemed completely lost in the face of the inexplicable situation that had suddenly confronted him. And not unnaturally, for it must be embarrassing to a self-styled god who supposedly knows the past, present and future to its utmost detail, to have something laid in his lap that wasn't in the book. Something had to be done.

"Well, I'm here," snapped Miss Simpkins. "When do we eat?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said the Valfather, hurriedly, and clapped his hands. A tall old geezer with a shiny bald head and flowing white beard stepped forth, plucking a few tentative notes on a bejeweled harp he carried.

"Sound mess call, Bragi," said the god of all the heroes, and sank limply onto his throne.

"Just take any vacant seat; dearie," said Brynhild in Ida's ear. "You're on your own now."

Miss Simpkins gave her a dirty look, but it was wasted on dimpled shoulder blades. Brynhild was making for the kitchen. A Valkyrie's work is never done.

In the meantime the milling crowd of heroes were beginning to sort themselves out and line up along the many long troughs that covered the floor of the vast hall. There were benches on one side of the troughs, and the warriors were shucking their outer armor and stacking it beside the place they meant to sit. Ida had a look about. Wotan seemed to have gone to sleep. There seemed to be no course open except to follow the catty advice she had just received. So she walked over to the nearest table where men were begining to seat themselves. They were spread out pretty well, but there would easily be room for another if they would move over a little. She came up between two big huskies and pushed them gently but firmly apart. Then she unbuckled her sword belt and laid it down on the bench. She was reaching for the corselet buckles when the storm broke.

"Hey," said the big bruiser on the right, "what's the big idea? Get in the kitchen where you belong and hurry up with the chow."

Her answer was to unsnap the holdings of the corselet and fling it on the bench. Then she calmly sat down beside it. A roar went up that filled that entire side of the hall. A hairy paw snatched at the back of her neck and a blustering voice began to say something. Whatever it was, it never got said, for it turned into a howl of pain and rage. A small but strong thumb was digging into a vital nerve of the gripping paw, and another small but strong hand had seized the elbow farther up. There was a mysterious twist, a heave and another twist, and the hero went flying headfirst across the trough and lit face down a dozen feet beyond. He skidded on, plowing up the sawdust for another yard or so, then sat up with a groan.

"That," announced Miss Simpkins, calmly, standing now and facing the circle of amazed heroes that had come up, "is known as the Kata Otoshi, or Shoul-

der Overthrow. A very tricky race of warriors called Japs invented it. Do any of you want to make something of it?"

There was a gleam in her eyes that had not been there since the day of the big riot back there on the back water front of Brooklyn. It seemed that nobody cared to make anything of it. Moreover, fighting in the hall was a breach of etiquette. They would have all afternoon for that out on the field.

"To set you straight," she added, "I'm a certified hero, like it or not."

Suddenly there was a great gust of laughter throughout the hall. Her victim was getting dazedly to his feet, rubbing his skinned nose with one hand.

"Ha, Gunnar," yelled one tall Viking, "how does it feel to be tossed on your ear by a woman?"

Gunnar growled and turned away amidst the guffaws of the crowd. He went over to another table and sat down, leaving his arms and armor where he had left it on the seat beside Ida Simpkins. She swept them off onto the floor to make more room beside her. Everywhere the men were sitting down now, though there was much conversation going on behind the backs of hands into ears. Heimdall's prophecy had matured faster than most. It was indeed a day to be remembered in Valhalla. For few of the heroes had a greater reputation for toughness in a rough-and-tumble than Gunnar, brother and slayer of Sigurd, the lover of Brynhild. The reverberations in Asgard would not die down for ages.

But a distraction was at hand in the form of food. Columns of Valkyries were deploying into the hall, each Valkyrie either bearing a huge tray of smoking meat or a horn of mead. They had shed their armor and were now in long white gowns with their yellow hair hanging free about their shoulders. Still other Valkyries were coming along the bench side of the troughs, handing out drinking vessels. One stopped sulkily beside Ida and handed her a silver-mounted white stein. It was a ghastly-looking thing, being fashioned out of a freshly scraped human skull. The mouth, nose and eyeholes had been deftly plugged with chased silver.

"What's this thing?" demanded Miss Simpkins.

"Your drinking mug," answered the handmaiden. "It is made from the head of one of your enemies. You got fourteen, according to our count, but the other thirteen are not made up yet. They'll be up later."

"Take it away," said Miss Simpkins, firmly, "and bring me a glass of water. I don't drink mead, and I won't drink out of that thing."

"Water?" echoed Skaugul, for that was her name. "What is this 'water'?"

"Water," reiterated Ida, "the stuff they fill lakes with—what they poison to make liquor of."

"But here everyone drinks the lovely mead—"

"Up till now," snapped the ex-schoolteacher. "Now, listen, don't start any arguments with me. I've passed all the tests and here I am—a hero. As such I rate anything I want. If these dumbbells are content to guzzle the slop they do, that's their affair. *I want water.* Get me?"

Skaugul took on the same unhappy look that Ida had noticed several times on Brynhild's broad face. She went away. Presently she came back—and with water. In the meantime the line of Valkyries had passed by on the far side of the trough, filling skulls as they came, and dumping enormous quantities of what looked and smelled like barbecued pig into the troughs.

"Skõl!" rang out tens of thousands of booming voices in unison, as all lifted their drinking mugs and emptied them. Miss Simpkins took a sip of her precious water. She had already noticed a lot of things about the service that were going to be bettered before she lived much longer; but, after all, Rome wasn't built in a day. Her companions up and down

the line were grabbing up joints of the roast pig with both hands and cramming them into their mouths. The entire Valkyrie force was now concentrating on the almost impossible task of keeping the mugs filled. Miss Simpkins ignored them all. Instead, she fumbled amongst her cast-off armor and found her little sword and drew it. With it and the one hand she could not help getting greasy, she sliced off a small sliver of the part of the carcass in her section of the trough.

It was not bad, though a little gamy, and she ate another slice. Her fellow heroes had already gone through their first joints and, after some intermediate burping on a truly colossal scale, had tackled their seconds. A few hearty eaters were even yelling for thirds, which were promptly brought on the run by the obedient Valkyries. After a little they began giving up, one by one, and sat back on their benches in sated contentment, taking only a gallon or so of the abundant mead as the ultimate chaser. Miss Simpkins beckoned Skaugul, who had been hanging around somewhat frightenedly in the immediate background.

"No vegetables? No greens? No dessert?" demanded Ida, coldly, knowing perfectly well there were not.

But Skaugul merely looked blank and a little scared. She bobbed her head in what might have been an attempt at a curtsy of a sort, then scurried away. It was a long time before she returned, but return she did, and with a bowl of dark-green leaves. Her guest glowered at them.

"From the tree Yggdrasil," said the poor little Valkyrie, trembling. Ida did not know it, but Skaugul had always thought a lot of Gunnar. Next to Thor, she always told the other girls—

Ida was glaring at her.

"Greens, you said," Skaugul explained, timidly. "Heidrun eats them. Maybe you could."

"Who's Heidrun?"

"She's the goat—the one that gives the mead." By that time Skaugul was on the verge of collapse. Greens this strange female hero had asked for, and greens she had brought—the only green thing on Asgard. It was all very weird, but there was at least the precedent of the goat. So Skaugul saw no harm in mentioning it.

"Skip it," snorted Miss Simpkins. She was going to have to tackle this problem nearer its source. There was no use in punishing the child more. She tried to close her ears to the mouth-smacking and belching that filled the hall about her. She thought grimly for a moment on this subject also. What beasts uncontrolled men can be, she thought. And when Ida thought about control—well, there was only one proper kind of control in Ida's mind. That was the Ida-directed variety. She might have begun to do a little planning then and there, but at once a great shout filled the hall.

"Let's fight!" it boomed, and on the instant the men were heaving their stuffed hulks off the benches and clambering into their harness. A number were already dressed and on their way out. Ida looked at her own little pile of gilt junk and decided to leave it where it lay. It might do for ceremonial occasions, but in a fight it would be a distinct handicap to her. For she firmly intended to attend the fight. It was the custom, and she was resolved to follow the customs. Oh, she would modify them, bit by bit, but still she would not buck them.

"I'm Sigmund," bellowed a towering blond giant beside her. "How's for a little scrap? Berserk, you know, with no holds barred." She noted that he had left off his hardware as she had done. "I want to get the hang of that stunt you worked on Gunnar. Ha, ha, ho, ho, haw, haw!"

"Lead the way," she said, crisply.

They were late getting onto the field. By the time they arrived practically everybody had teamed off and were going

at it hammer and tongs. There were many styles of fighting in progress. Some combats were duels, others between groups. Some men fought in full armor with buckler and long sword, others dispensed with the shield and flailed about them with eight-foot two-handed swords that were about as light as crowbars of the same length. Still others used war clubs and maces, and some hammered away with mailed fists. There were wrestling matches as well.

Some of the fights had already terminated, for the ground was beginning to be strewn with stray heads, severed arms and legs, and not a few of the heroes lay on their backs, split from shoulder to navel by some lucky swipe of a battle-ax. Miss Simpkins picked her way through the carnage with considerable disgust, though she knew that they would all come alive when mess call sounded again. Oh, what a wacky place, and how lucky for them that she had at last got there!

They eventually reached a comparatively clear spot, about a mile from the hall. Until then they had had to duck and dodge repeatedly to avoid losing their own heads through the backsweep of the sword of some fighter too intent to note what was going on behind or beside him. Ida stopped, and Sigmund walked on beyond about twenty paces. Then he turned, vented a tremendous roar, and charged.

She stood stock-still until he was almost upon her. At that, she gave but a little bit—just enough not to be bowled over by the impact. She did not go into action until his arms were already about her, ready to begin a bearlike squeeze. Then a lot of things happened fast. Something gouged him in the small of the back, and a sharp elbow was sticking in his throat. Sigmund hit the ground, bit out a hunk of turf, and came up yelling.

He closed again, but that time she did not throw him. She grabbed one hand and crossed his arm with hers. Then she snuggled up to him and twisted. He howled with pain and refused to go down on his knees as any mortal would have. So she increased the pressure by a hairbreadth and was slightly sickened by feeling and hearing the bones pop. Not that it mattered. They would be whole in time for dinner.

He staggered back, looking incredulously at his dangling arm, folding it up and down across its break-to-make-sure there was no mistake about it.

"W-wh-what how?" he stammered.

"The first maneuver," she replied primly, "is known as the Sora Towoshi, or Sudden Fall. The second treatment is called Ude Ori, or the Arm Break. You should have dropped to the ground. Then I would not have had to spoil your arm."

He could only gaze and fiddle with his arm in blank amazement. Yet he towered a good foot above her and probably tipped the scales at three hundred flat. It wasn't reasonable!

Ida Simpkins was aware of a sudden hush on the battlefield. Hundreds of whole and maimed heroes had knocked off their encounters and were hurrying up to see the fun. In a moment there was a deep ring about them, listening open-mouthed to the stories being told by the score or so that had witnessed Sigmund's trimming. There were deep curses, or heavy sighs, depending upon the temperament of the auditor.

"It's magic," whispered one, but in the voice of the gale.

"Stuff and nonsense," whipped out Miss Simpkins. "Who said that?"

A burly man clad in red-gold armor, complete with shield and broadsword, stepped sheepishly forward.

"Me. Högni. I say it's magic. But it will not avail against an armed man. Not a man of courage and skill."

"Yeah? Well, come on and do your stuff. I'll show you the Taka Tooi. It's not magic, but it'll stop *you*."

Högni seemed to regret his outspokenness, for he showed no anxiety to put his words into action, but the hoots and

jeers of his mesamates soon stimulated him into action. He twirled his sword and charged in the same reckless bull-fashion that Sigmund had. A gasp that must have made every leaf on Yggdrasil quiver rose from the watching crowd. For the woman stood quietly waiting, the only tense thing about her her eyes. Then he was upon her, with his sword upraised for the smashing cut that would have split her to the pelvis. But it never fell. Like lightning, a hand shot up and grasped his wrist, yanking the charging hero forward, and twisting at the same time. In the same split second she interposed her heel behind his and gave a sidewise shove. Högni spilled quite neatly a couple of yards away.

Ida gave him an appraising look as he scrambled, muttering, to his feet. He was really enraged now, as the whole of Valhalla made the welkin ring with their ribald comment. He forgot his shield and sword and was coming at her full tilt, grasping and ungrasping his huge paws. She calmly turned her back on him and started to walk away.

She felt the wind on the back of her neck as he reached out for her. No eye among the bystanders was quick enough to see what followed. Some said she merely stooped and that he dived over her. Others said she tossed him. Whatever she did, Högni was through for the afternoon. When they turned him over and took stock of his condition, his head lolled indifferently in any direction. That hero broke his neck.

Ida Simpkins had had enough, too, but she did not want to admit it. She was grateful now for Tim Hannigan, the big cop on the beat back home. He used to come into her gym and work out with her, and taught her tricks for some she taught him. But at that, throwing heavy men around is work, and Ida was hard put not to give vent to panting. She tried to walk past the crowd and back to the hall, but they would not have it. They clustered about her, all thoughts of fighting any more that afternoon gone by the board. They wanted to know what the new hero was called, and how she could defeat three of Valhalla's best champions with such seeming ease.

"The name," she said, very precisely, "is Miss Ida."

"Misaeda," they told the ones in the back ranks who might not have heard. "The champion calls herself Misaeda."

To answer the rest called for a speech, and to make a speech she needed wind. For that she needed time. So she asked the nearest huskies to kindly make a pile of handy corpses so she would have a rostrum to address them from. Then she stood back, breathing heavily, while they dragged the bodies up and heaped them, topping them off with a layer of shields that served very well as a floor. She climbed up onto it and motioned them to assemble in front of her. When everything was right, she began.

"You call yourselves heroes. Perhaps you were. You call yourselves champions. That you are not, and I'll tell you why. You don't live right. You gorge yourselves with rich, unbalanced foods, and dim your wits by guzzling liquor. You're fat and flabby and you don't care, because no matter what happens to you, you'll be revived enough to continue with your hoggish stuffing at the next meal. You lack skill, too. Fighters, bah! You're a lot of butchers. You have strength, bad as your present condition is, but you don't know how to use it. I guess that covers it."

She stopped abruptly and started to descend from her macabre rostrum. But they would not let her—just as she had planned. They wanted to know more—how to get in trim, how to fling giants about the way she did. She heard them in grim silence. Yes, she would teach them a lot of things—all but the last. That would be her secret, or at least until her control was established beyond possible challenge.

"All right," she flashed back at them, "if you mean it, get to work! Strip off that armor. Then line up out there in as many ranks as you please, but with

room around every man enough to swing his arms and body about without interfering with his neighbor."

She waited while they stripped down to their underwear and got in gym formation, issuing the appropriate orders to correct the formation. When all was set, she started. The Swedish movements she gave them, from A to Z, demonstrating each from her high perch, then calling off the numbers. In half an hour they were sweating profusely. At the end of the hour, nine shamefaced champs lay quietly down and quit, winded and aching in every muscle. But she went relentlessly on, until she caught sight of the Valfather walking across the field accompanied by the faithful Bragi. She allowed them to stop for a rest, and awaited the coming of the all-highest.

"What manner of fighting is this we have today?" he asked mildly, as he came up. "I have seen strange ways of fighting in the world, but never a thing like this."

"Oh, we're not fighting now," she explained, "but getting ready to fight. You see I've got to get the b—"—she bit off the "bums" that came so readily to her lips and substituted "heroes"—"to get the heroes in shape to fight. It may take months. They're in awful condition now, what with lack of exercise, inadequate diet and all."

The Valfather's single eye bulged a bit. What this female hero was saying had the ring of madness. It was astounding. Lack of exercise? Why, his heroes had fought to extinction twice daily for æons. Inadequate diet? Why, his boys could outeat, and did, any men of comparable weight and occupation in the world. Only giants could exceed them. What was this thing Brynhild had brought up from earth and Heimdall had passed over the bridge?

"I'll talk to you more about it later," she promised him. "Right now I want to let these men go, and look over the commissary arrangements."

Paying no further heed to the Valfather, she stood up straight again and yelled for attention. The weary warriors struggled to their feet, many cramped from their momentary rest.

"Dismiss!" she said, and started to get down. But they stood staring at her. She turned back. "Dismiss, I said. It's all over for today. Scatter. Rest. Do anything. We'll take the next lesson right after breakfast tomorrow."

Down on the ground, she addressed herself to the Valfather once more.

"I'd like to see the back of the house now, please. Who is the chief cook and bottle washer?"

"Back of the house? Bottle washer? The chief cook is Andhrimnir, but we haven't any of those other things."

"You show me, pop," she said, taking Bragi by the arm. "We ought to be able to give it the once-over before supper, don't you think?"

The venerable Bragi looked startled, but he nodded. So they started back across the field. It was a winding course, for the spent warriors lay everywhere—whole for a change, but more miserable than if they had been hacked in pieces. There was only a second's pain when an ax cleaved an arm away, but reaching for the sky for minutes at a time left aftereffects. But there was not a hero there but was resolved to go on doing it. They were beginning, in a formless sort of way, to hate this Misaeda, but at the outset she had aroused their admiration. Now every man of them wanted to fit himself so he could do the things she had done. And each, as he groveled and panted, looked forward to the day when he could fling people around—beginning with Misaeda.

III.

As in many palaces and the "grand hotels" of earth, the back of the house at Valhalla was as dismal as the recesses of an outmoded penitentiary, in sharp contrast with the gilded exterior. The kitchen was dark, gloomy and dirty, with a bloodstained earthen floor. Innumerable cobwebs hung from the un-

dressed rafters. A huge caldron stood in the middle of the room, and in the far corner a tank of heroic dimensions. The walls were lined with racks to hold the mead-carrying horns, and the stench was terrible. The most obnoxious features of the place, however, were the pigsty and the cook himself.

Andhrimnir was a giant—and an ultra-fat one. He sat dozing on a stool six feet high, but his bulk was so great that his posture was a squat. He had nine chins and five bellies, lying fold upon fold, and his face was coarse and stupid. He was snoring stertorously as Misaeda entered.

In the pigpen—which lacked only grandstands to qualify as a bull ring, so immense was it—stood a colossal boar, surrounded by thralls. One thrall, far larger than the rest, was maneuvering before the pig with a heavy poleax. The pig was watching him anxiously with an expression of utter woe, and all the while great tears rolled out of his tiny red eyes and dripped from his snout. Misaeda thought she had never seen so miserable a creature.

"That is Saehrimnir," explained Bragi, proudly. "It is him we eat thrice daily. He has just been magically reassembled from the remains of the dinner. When the thrall kills him, Andhrimnir will awake and thrust him into the pot. It is a very neat and economical arrangement."

"It's outrageous," pronounced Misaeda, looking at the poor animal with rare compassion. "Wait until the S. P. C. A. hears about this. Why, to slaughter the same beast three times a day, day after day, for years and years. . . . Oooooh!"

She shuddered. There was that angle, of course. But she was also thinking of such collateral issues as monotony of diet—which the drunken heroes never seemed to notice—trichinosis, a constant threat, and vitamin deficiency.

The ax fell, the pig squealed, and

Misaeda plugged her ears with her fingers. All slaughtered pigs squeal, but few pigs are of elephantine proportions. Saehrimnir's squeal might well have served as the signal for an air alert for the entire Atlantic coast of America. The cook, Andhrimnir, heard it, even through his deep slumber, and stirred. Misaeda hurried out a side door, dragging Bragi behind her.

There Misaeda saw something that froze her into her customary stance of cool self-possession. Hundreds of weary Valkyries sat on benches that ran along the outer back wall of the palace, waiting for the next mess call. But what caught Misaeda's eye was Brynhild and one other person. They were standing apart, Brynhild and a sly, sneaky-looking, undersized man, whispering together. At Misaeda's sudden and unexpected appearance amongst them, they both looked up, started guiltily, then exchanged knowing glances. The little man smiled a quick, crooked smile, nodded, then disappeared abruptly—much as a light goes out. Brynhild stalked to the nearest bench and sat down, trying to appear indifferent. Misaeda knew, without being told, that the little man was Loki, the Norse god of mischief. There was trouble brewing, and it was being brewed for her. Her immediate disposition of it was a disdainful sniff.

"Now," she said to the fatuous Bragi, "what about this mead stuff? Where does it come from, and how do they handle it?"

"Ah, yes," said he, "the lovely mead. Follow!"

He led her past the seated rows of fagged Valkyries to the place where an open trough entered the kitchen wall. The trough was quite similar to an irrigation or mining flume, and conveyed a gurgling, sticky amber liquid that smelled to high heaven. Valhallic mead, consisting as it does of thirty percent honey, thirty percent pale ale, and forty percent alcohol, *would* be smelly. The legions of flies blackening the planked sides of the flume did nothing to detract from the general nauseousness of the scene. Now Misaeda understood the big tank that stood in the corner of the kitchen, and why it was relatively easy for the harassed waitresses to satisfy the Gargantuan thirst of the Valhalla warriors. Or Einheriar, as Misaeda had just learned they were collectively called.

She insisted on tracing the flume to its source, so the unwilling Bragi had to trail along. In a couple of minutes they came upon the obvious source of the myriads of flies. Just abaft the kitchen was the golden-wired corral within which the horses of the Valkyrie squadrons were kept. They may have been celestial horses, but they conformed closely in their habits to the earthly and mortal kind.

The trail led on through the golden grove, then upward. At length the gold-leaved trees gave way to green, and she knew that they were in the famous upper bow of the great tree Yggdrasil. It was a forest in itself, with many levels and ramps leading from one to another. She saw many kinds of darting and flying animals, or others placidly browsing—squirrels, eagles, ravens, owls, and stags. But the flume led on, wide open all the way.

At last she found the source. High in the uppermost branches was a filthy platform on which stood a goat, no doubt the goat Heidrun that Skaugul had mentioned. It was a noble animal, if size is any criterion of nobility, for it matched the pig Saehrimnir in dimensions, standing some forty feet from ground to spine. It ate steadily from the leaves of the overhanging bough and its udder continually streamed the fresh-made mead into the trough that it bestrode.

"Why couldn't that animal give milk just as well?" asked Misaeda, with pointed scorn.

"She could. She did," said Bragi. "But who wants milk? We worked magic on her to change it. Neat, eh?"

Misaeda's sniff, to his poetic mind, did not constitute a satisfactory answer. She was unaware of it, and if she had

been aware would not have cared a farthing, but at that moment she added one more name to the list of her nonfriends. Miss Simpkins had a way of getting people to do what she wanted them to do, but she lacked the art of making them like it.

"I've seen enough," she announced, having finished a thoroughly disapproving survey of the placid Heidrun.

"Asgard was a dreary place," remarked the innocent Bragi, as they left, "until we had mead. Heavens, you know, are always dull. One has to do something about it after the novelty has worn off. Think of it, I've been here centuries and centuries with nothing to do but sound mess call three times a day and render a ballad now and then on request!"

Misaeda's reply was a super-sniff. Might we say a snort?

Supper that night was a repetition of dinner. Tons and tons of the unfortunate Saehrimnir's flesh and thousands of gallons of the potent mead vanished. It was accompanied, as before, by millions of cubic feet of belly gases erupted by the contented Einheriar. Altogether, according to Misaeda's lights, it was a most disgusting performance. To her further disapproval, the meal was accompanied by some very flagrant flirtations between the heroes and the willing Valkyries. It appeared that the evening meal, unlike breakfast and dinner, was to be followed by exhibitions of prowess in the field of love rather than in fighting.

"You see, my arm is all right now," said Sigmund, who had seated himself beside her. He demonstrated.

"If it's still there a second from now," she told him, "I'll tie it into a knot with the other one."

He removed the offending arm with a hurt and baffled look. He had certainly tried his best to make this female hero feel at home—offering her a challenge and all that—but everything he did seemed to be wrong. He furrowed his handsome blond brow a moment, then thought of the obvious *mot juste*.

"Silly of me, wasn't it?" asked the warrior. "One hero trying to make another. Sorry. Naturally, now that we have female heroes, we'll have to have some masculine Valkyries to match."

"Sir!"

And that was the extent of Misaeda's supper conversation. Sigmund hung around for a while, but found it discouraging. When Bragi appeared on the stage for the evening's ballad, he seized the occasion to vanish quietly in the crowd.

Misaeda got through that awful evening somehow. Then some magic was performed. The long troughs and benches disappeared as in a dream. In their places were lines of golden couches. Apparently taps was close at hand.

She picked a couch in the very center of the hall, since, being a hero, she had to sleep there with the others. But for the edification of her neighbors, she most pointedly drew a circle about it with her sandaled toe before she retired. To people steeped in the traditions of potential magic it was sufficient. She did not enlighten them as to what the purpose of the circle was, or what would happen to anyone rash enough to cross it, but the exhibition of the day had been enough for them all.

Morning brought breakfast, and after breakfast came the forenoon of combat time. But that morning the throngs of warriors waited. Their routine had been upset. They simply didn't know what to do. It was Misaeda who told them. Calisthenics again. And she also hinted that those who went easiest on the mead would have the best chance of sticking it out until noon. Because she meant to work them to a frazzle, and did.

All the while, the Valfather sat dejectedly on his throne, contemplating the gloomy future and the puzzling and unprecedented and unpredicted present. He was a sad and disillusioned man, godling, or what you will. He had traded an eye for all-knowledge and wis-

dom, and had undergone other harrowing experiences in order to make himself more fit as the leader of his people. He knew, or thought he knew, the ultimate culmination of all his efforts. And that culmination was defeat, extinction, and obliteration. Pure tragedy. Nor was there any way out. So the Norns had foretold it; so it would come to pass. It was they who had all knowledge of what had been; what was, and what was to be. Yet at no time had there been mention made of a female hero coming to Valhalla. It was that that troubled him most. Had he given his eye in vain? Were the Norns completely dependable?

Only last evening Loki had come to him. He did not like or trust Loki, but what the fellow had said seemed sound advice. Loki had insinuated that perhaps this female hero who had unaccountably appeared within the walls of sacred Valhalla might be a giant in disguise. How else could one so frail fling heroes about, breaking arms and necks?

So he himself, Wotan, the All-Highest, master of runes and prophecies, had cut runes and studied them. The answer was blank. The woman was no giant, no sorceress—a simple Norse hero cut down while resisting the hated Cimbri. There was no choice left him. He had to follow the advice of the tricky Loki and seek the aid of the reluctant Norns. It was a thing they should have told him, and had not. It was his right and duty to demand an answer. So he sent Loki as the messenger. Loki was due back at any moment.

It was in this manner that things stood when Bragi tinkled his harp and sounded mess call that momentous day. It was in this manner that things stood when the strange hero, Misaeda, and her heaving and flabbergasted disciples staggered off the fighting fields into the grand mess hall of Valhalla. Not one of them, not excepting Misaeda—though she knew dirty work of some stripe was afoot—had any inkling of what was coming.

Before they could sit down, Bragi tinkled his harp and sang out the call to "attention." The panting heroes stiffened where they stood. The tableau on the thronal dais told them something big was about to happen. Loki was there, trying to look self-effacing and unimportant, as was his wont—and Loki's presence always meant trouble. Also the chief Valkyrie was there, Brynhild, looking extremely satisfied with herself and glowing with virtuous triumph. The Valfather was slumped in his throne chair fingering a carved bit of a stick.

After a moment he handed it to Bragi, and commanded, "Read!" Bragi took it, cleared his throat, and began.

"Hark! A message from the wise sisters:

> In Hlidskialf sits Odin,
> His rule is empty.
> Misaeda, amongst the Einheriar,
> Usurps him.
> Wroth are the Dises,
> Their sooth unheeded.
>
> Signed:
> Urdar, Verdandi, Skuld, the Norns.

There was a hush that was painful.

"What say the Einheriar?" asked the bard.

The Einheriar exchanged a lot of sidelong glances, but not one of them saw fit to say anything. They all had visions of fair hands pushing at their throats, twisting their wrists and arms, or other unorthodox contortions that would make them subject to the ridicule of their fellows. No hero cared to stick his neck out. Not one of them opened his trap. Let the gods handle it.

The Valfather stirred himself. He snapped out of his defeatist lethargy long enough to get to his feet and declare:

"The self-styled hero, Misaeda, having wormed herself into our midst and violated our hospitality, is hereby expelled from Valhalla. The masters-at-arms will take appropriate measures."

Gunnar and Sigmund, who were the masters-at-arms, exchanged significant

looks. It took no clairvoyant to read their meaning. It was simply, "How?"

Misaeda accepted the challenge. From where she stood in the center of the hall she called out in a high, clear voice:

"Fiddlesticks! I've got something to say about this."

Then she stared forward, the armored men clankingly making way for her. They were keenly interested. Scarcely one of them but whose cheeks still burned and ears tingled with some sharp rebuke of the morning. They respected Misaeda, but they would gladly have seen her turned wrong side out. They loathed Loki, the trickster, but they credited him with being smart. They loved their Valfather, but knew he could be thunderous and pompous as all get-out on occasion; and they also knew that Brynhild was nobody to be trifled with. They looked forward with considerable relish to what would happen when Misaeda tangled with that trio.

They had not long to wait. Misaeda was at the foot of the throne. She was mounting the dais! She was up with the big shots, where only gods and demigods dared stand!

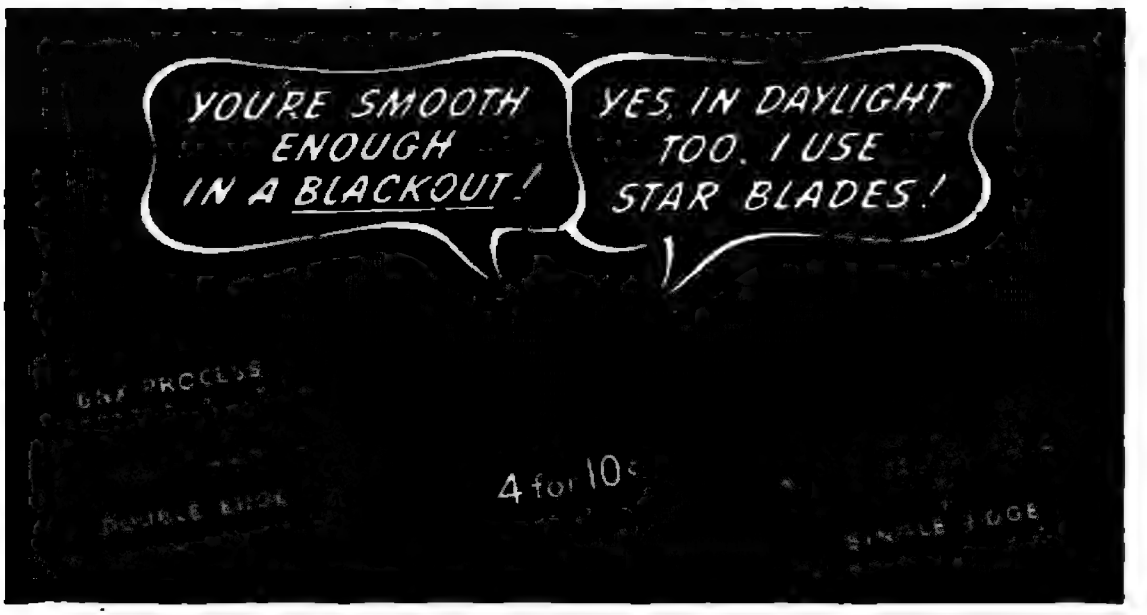
"Listen, everybody," she began. "I didn't want to come to this lousy heaven of yours. I'm stuck with it. And it's that dumb woman's fault." Here she flung an accusing finger at the astonished Brynhild.

"She can't distinguish between right-thinking people and your kind. But I'm here, and I mean to make the best of it. Let the old Norns be wroth! What are we here for? To waste our lives in debauchery and stupid dueling, or to prepare for Ragnarok—"

A gasp from tens of thousands of throats in union almost sucked in the walls. Ragnarok, the unmentionable, shouted from the platform! It was hideous; it was blasphemous; it was unthinkable. All the world knew about Ragnarok and dreaded it, but never spoke of it. The ultimate fate of the world was the most hush-hush thing imaginable. Nobody was supposed to know it but the Valfather, Mimir, and the Norns. And all mankind, and godkind, and giantkind, and dwarf and fairykind joined in the conspiracy. If the good and kindly old man who was their chief god chose to kid himself that only he knew the future, they would not disillusion him.

The Valfather's lone eye bugged.

"Did you say Ragnarok, my child?"



he asked anxiously. "Are you, perchance, a fourth Norn, that you know the unknowable?"

"Do I look like one of those crackbrained old women?" she countered. "Why do you have to be a Norn to know what everybody knows and has always known? This cockeyed set-up you have here is headed straight for a fall, and it's no secret, but you sit here day after day mooning about it and grieving over what you think can't be helped. Well, I'm not usurping anything. I'm trying to help you, that's all. If you expect to make any showing at all at Ragnarok, we'll have to get this bunch of bums in better condition. They are fat and flabby, and their kidneys are all shot from swilling mead . . . . oh, my, they're *terrible!*"

The Valfather's single eye was roaming the sea of upturned, eager faces. He did not like in the least the turn the conversation had taken. Cats were being let out of the bag by droves. And, to his amazement, the assembled throng of heroes took the nasty reference to them with meek silence. If this woman kept on talking, it was hard to say what would come out next.

"Suppose we adjourn this hearing to my chambers, my dear," suggested he, solicitously. "It must be trying to talk before so many."

"Very well," Misaeda snapped back, "but that rat"—indicating the fawning Loki by a contemptuous jerk of the thumb—"and that cat"—meaning the indignant Head Valkyrie—"don't sit in. I've got things to tell you for your own good."

The Valfather winced. Sometimes Frigga talked like that, too. He knew from a wealth of experience that whatever was for his own good was going to be hard to take. He sighed audibly. Women were like that, though, and you had to make the best of them.

"This way, my dear," he said resignedly. Then, turning to Bragi, "Tell 'em to sit down and eat. We'll put out a release later."

In the interview in the chambers—which were the usual barnlike rooms Misaeda had observed elsewhere in Valhalla, palatial only because of the vast areas of gilding—the ex-headmistress of the Gowanus Settlement School did not pull her punches.

"Are you going to be a sap all your life?" she began, with her customary disregard for tact. "You're all tied up in knots in the silliest, most impractical mythology ever invented by drunken poets. And all you do about it is sit and suffer. Or else you go off the reservation entirely and squander months down in Midgard breaking up families and impairing the morals of minors. Do you think it's *right!*"

She spoke with a bitter fierceness that drove him straightway into the corner. He was on the defensive from the first onset.

"Wh-wh—"

"No. Of course you don't. You're a decent guy—at heart. But you're too darn gullible. You believe you've *got* to do these things because they're in the book. Nuts! If you set yourself up as chief god in this wacky world, why don't you work at it? *Do something.*"

She paused for breath, glaring at him with open disapproval. He floundered for a moment and managed a weak, "But what can I do?" when she was back at him.

"What can you do? Plenty! You swapped an eye for knowledge that everybody has. Go back and get your eye and tell old Mimir to go and jump in his own ocean. You keep fooling around on the advice of three crazy old women who are doing their best to make a monkey out of you—and succeeding. Bosh! I know as much about the future or anything else as they do. You are worrying about the giants, and the dog Garm and the wolf Fenris. Well, I ask you. What has Garm and Fenris got that is so terrible? Bad breath—halitosis, they called it in my age. Get yourself a gas mask, that's all there is to that. And you're worried about the dragon

Nidhug that is gnawing at the roots of Yggdrasil. Why don't you kill it now, while the killing is good? Why wait until they all gang up on you? Snap these heroes out of their chronic jag, and swat the frost giants. Swat the fire giants. Send expeditions everywhere, one at a time. Then you'll have no Ragnarok."

"But, my dear," protested the harassed Valfather, "you don't understand. Ragnarok is far in the future. There is nothing we can do about it now. We have peace. Don't you understand? If we do the things you urge, we upset the *status quo*. That is always bad."

"Nuts. Excuse my frankness, but I seem to remember a gentleman hight Chamberlain. He talked like you did—of 'peace in our time.' There was another, somewhat before him, who said, 'After me the deluge.' That's you, on both counts. I ask you again, are you going to be a dope all your life?"

The Valfather was much distressed. *Nobody* had ever talked to him like that—not even Frigga, in her most uninhibited moments. One of the tremendous advantages of the godhead was the immunity to unmasked opinion. His satellites had always been Yes-men, and there was no denying it—he liked it. He must get rid of this troublesome female hero, with her sharp tongue and utter lack of respect of authority. He had the fleeting idea of summoning Brynhild and having her take this Misaeda back to where she had found her and dump her in the ocean. He stammeringly mentioned it.

"Not a chance," was Misaeda's tart reply. "Your stupid, bungling system wished me on you, and I stick. You've hauled me back a couple of millennia and there is no place for me to go. But if I can't have the Christian Heaven I'm entitled to, I'll do what I can with this one—on a give-and-take basis. I'll help you, you help me. Between us, we can make Valhalla a decent place to live. As for Ragnarok—that's in the bag."

Wotan tried to digest that. For he had never had much use for women except in a limited sense, and all she had said was rank heresy. Try as they might, the Aesir could not hope to survive Ragnarok. It was so written in the sacred runes. It had been foretold by the Norns. Mimir had confirmed it. Wotan himself knew it from the prescience he had so dearly bought. This Misaeda talked sheer sophistry. Yet she talked it with such an air of determined confidence that his own self-confidence was shaken. Perhaps in a case like this compromise was in order.

"My dear," he said, after a lengthy communing with his own thoughts, "I have reconsidered my expulsion order. I believe you are truly a hero from Midgard. As such, I shall let you remain in Valhalla. More than that, since you appear to have practical ideas, I shall make you chief of the Einheriar. Handle them as you will—with Ragnarok in mind. But not a word of that to them, do you hear?"

"I hear," she acknowledged grimly. The fable of the Camel in the Tent was not far from her mind. First a foothold, then control. What more could a sincere, ambitious girl ask? Well, a few things. And she asked for them.

"Very well," she added. "I'll do it. But I need a little help."

"Ask it."

"I want," she began, "first of all, that when we eat this hog Sachrimnir next, that he'll stay eaten. Get me? After that, I want herds of cattle, flocks of chickens, and some sheep. Get Mimir to furnish fish twice a week—he has plenty, and the Einheriar need variety."

The Valfather nodded approval. But he hadn't heard the half of it.

"I want," she continued, "ten thousand thralls with oxen and plows to turn up the south recreation pasture. I need only the north one for my exercises and drills. After that I want it planted in vegetables. I want cabbages, spinach and potatoes. I want asparagus, lettuce, radishes and artichokes. I want onions.

Garlic. Corn and wheat."

"It's a big order," murmured the All-Highest. "Moreover, the heroes won't eat that stuff. I know 'em."

"They'll eat it," she assured him, with a stabbing glance of those steely gray eyes, "and like it. I'll guarantee it."

"All right," sighed the Valfather. "Go on."

"I want that fat cook fired . . . the kitchen thoroughly cleaned and painted white inside—not gold . . . and that mead-producing goat turned back into a normal goat—"

"But, my dear, the heroes will not drink milk—"

"They *will* drink milk," affirmed Misaeda, determinedly. "But not in such quantities as they have been drinking mead. That calls for cheesemakers. Which brings up another item. Send a squadron of Valkyries down to Midgard and have them pick out a few score deserving housewives, instead of swashbuckling killers, for a change. What we need up here is homemakers—not these floozies you hire as body snatchers."

"Floozies?" queried the Valfather, wrinkling his noble brow.

"Hussies, if you like the word better. That's all half these Valkyries are. What goes on here after dinner at nights is simply scandalous, no less. I won't have it."

By then Wotan was in such a state of confusion that he could only nod acceptance. Inwardly he was cursing the Norns for not having let him in on this thing in advance and told him what to do. He was a simple, primitive war god, and not versed in the technicalities that now confronted him.

"What else?" he asked meekly.

"I guess that's all for now," said Misaeda, relenting. She knew just how far to push a thing on a single interview. She had learned that with countless contacts with high-school board officials. Up here in Asgard she had all Eternity in which to work. What could not be done today could be done tomorrow.

The Valfather bowed her out. She marched by him primly, out onto the platform, and down the steps to the floor of the hall. The meal was over, as she well knew from the chorus of burps and the clicking of toothpicking. But she stalked to her seat, nevertheless, and sat down as if nothing out of the way had happened.

"I saved some chow for you," whispered Sigmund, leaning over and opening his tunic. Underneath his sweaty shirt was a side of ribs, greasy and underdone, but still warm.

"Thanks," said Misaeda, laconically, taking it and pretending to nibble. She was fed up with pork, but in her own peculiar way she was gratified. At least one of the heroic dead was showing symptoms of incipient good manners.

That night Misaeda lay on her golden couch—within the magic ring—and thought and thought. So far, so good. In a day or so she would introduce a balanced diet; her system of calisthenics was already doing marvels. Next would come the business of teaching the defunct heroes table manners; the matter of appointing corporals and sergeants and the teaching of squads right and similar basic maneuvers. After that the Blitzkrieg tactics.

Then an errant breeze wafted to her the odor of ten thousand spent warriors lying on the weather side of her. Oh, yes. There must be showers, too, and some arrangement about laundry.

Misaeda sighed. A woman's work is never done, she told herself for the nth time. These poor, poor men—so helpless, so goofy. It was lucky for them she had come amongst them! Tomorrow there would be much to do. She was so ecstatic in her previsions that she did not note or even hear the somnolent mutterings of the hero on the next couch.

"Ah, god," he moaned, "Misaeda! What next?"

THE END.

The Bones

by Theodore Sturgeon and James H. Beard

The super-radio turned out a failure as a radio—but it had other properties. It let one live the past of whatever animal's bones were in it; it could be detective, judge and jury and—

Illustrated by Cartier

Donzey came to the door with a pair of side-cutting pliers in his hand and soldering flux smeared on the side of his jaw. "Oh—Farrel. Come in."

"Hi, Donzey." The town's police force ducked his head under the doorway and followed the mechanic through a littered living room into what had once been a pantry. It was set up as a workshop, complete with vises, a power lathe, a small drill press and row upon row of tools. It was a great deal neater than the living room. By the window was a small table on which was built an extraordinarily complicated radio set which featured a spherical antenna and more tubes and transformers and condensers than a small-town bicycle repairman can be expected to buy and still eat. Farrel added a stick of gum to his already oversize wad and stared at it.

"That it?" he asked.

"That's it," said Donzey proudly. He sat down beside the table and picked up an electric soldering iron. "She ought to work this time," he said, holding the iron close to his cheek to see if it were hot enough.

"And I used to think FM was the initials of a college," said Farrel.

"Not in radio," said Donzey. The lump of solder in his hand slumped into glittering fluidity, sealed a joint. "And this is a different kind of frequency modulation, too. This is the set that's going to make us some real money, Farrel."

"Yeah," said the sheriff without enthusiasm. He was thinking of the irrepressible Donzey's flotation motor, that was supposed to use the power developed by a chain of hollow balls floating to the top of a tank; of his ingenious plan for zoning highways by disappearing concrete walls between the lanes—a swell idea only somebody else had patented it. Also there was a little matter of a gun which could be set to fire thirty bullets at any interval between a fifth of a second to thirty minutes. Only nobody wanted it. Donzey was as unsuccessful as he was enthusiastic. He kept body and soul indifferently together only because he had infinite powers of persuasion. He could sell one of his ideas to the proverbial brass monkey—more; he could get a man like Farrel to invest capital in an idea like his directional FM transmitter. His basic principle was a signal beamed

straight up, which would strike the heaviside layer and bounce *almost* straight down, thus being receivable only in the receiver at which it was aimed. Donzey had got the idea over at the pool parlor. If you could aim an eight-ball at a six-ball, off the cushion, you ought to be able to aim a signal from the transmitter to the receiver, off the heaviside layer. The thing would be handy as a wireless field telephone for military liaison.

Of course, Donzey knew little about radio. But he always worked on the theory that logic was as good or better than book-learning. His mind was as incredibly facile as his stubby fingers. What it lacked in exactitude it made up for in brilliance. Seeing the wiring on the set, an electrical engineer would have sighed and asked Donzey if he was going to put tomato sauce on all that spaghetti. Donzey would have called the engineer a hidebound conservative. Because of Donzey's pragmatic way of working, the world will never know the wiring diagram of that set. Donzey figured that if it worked he could build more like it. If it didn't, who cared how it was made?

Donzey laid the soldering iron on the bed it had charred out for itself on the workbench, brushed back his wiry black hair without effect, and announced that he was ready. "She may not work just yet," he said, plugging the set in and holding his breath for a moment in silent prayer until he was sure that the fuse was not going to blow. "But then again she might." When the tubes began to glow, he cut in the loud-speaker. It uttered a horrifying roar; he tuned it down to a hypnotic hum.

Farrel folded himself into a chair and stared glumly at the proceedings, wondering whether or not he would ever get his twenty-eight dollars and sixty cents out of this contraption. Donzey switched off the speaker and handed him a headset. "Put these on and see what you get."

Farrel clamped the phones over his ears and tried to look bored. Donzey went back to his knobs and dials.

"Anything yet?"

"Yeah." Farrel shifted his cud. "It howls like a houn' dawg."

Donzey grunted and put a finger on one phone connection and a thumb on the other. Farrel swore and snatched off the headset. "What you tryin' to do," he growled, rubbing a large, transparent ear, "make me deef?"

"Easy with the phones, son." Donzey was fifteen years younger than the sheriff, but he could say "son" and make it stick. "Phone condenser's shot. And that's the last .00035 I have. Got to rig up something. Wait a minute." He flew out of the room.

Farrel sighed and walked over to the window. Donzey was locally famous for the way he "rigged things up." He rigged up a supercharger for the municipal bandit-chaser which really worked, once you got used to its going backward in second gear. Farrel was not at all surprised to see Donzey out in the yard, busily rummaging through the garbage can.

He entered the room a moment later, unabashedly blowing the marrow out of a section of mutton bone. "Got a cigarette?" he said, wiping his mouth. Farrel dourly handed over a pack. Donzey ripped it open, spilling the smokes over the workbench. He stripped off the tinfoil, tore it in half, and after cleaning up the bone inside and out with Farrel's handkerchief, poked some of the foil into the bone and wrapped it carefully in the other piece. "Presto," he said. "A condenser."

"My hankerchief—" began Farrel.

"You'll be able to buy yourself a trainload of 'em when we put this on the market," said Donzey with superb confidence. He busily connected the outside layer of tinfoil to one phone plug and the inside wad to the other. "Now," he said, handing the earphones to the sheriff, "that ought to do it. I'm sending from this key. There's no connec-

tion between transmitter and receiver. The signal's going straight up—I hope. It should come straight down."

"But I don't know that dit-dot stuff," said Farrel, putting on the headset nevertheless.

"Don't have to," said Donzey. "I'll play 'Turkey in the Straw.' You ought to recognize that."

They sat down and again Donzey switched on the juice. His fingers found the key as his eyes found Farrel's face; and then his fingers forgot about the key.

Farrel's heavy lids closed for a long second, while his lantern jaw slowly lit up. Then the eyes began to open, slowly. At just the halfway mark, they stopped, and the man did something extraordinary with his nostrils. A long sigh escaped him, and his wide lips flapped resoundingly in the breeze. His head tilted slowly to one side.

"Mmmwaw," he said.

"Farrel!" snapped Donzey, horrified. "M-m-ba-a-a-a—"

Before Donzey could reach him he reared up out of his chair, tossing his head back. By some miracle the earphones stayed in place. Farrel's hands hit the floor; he landed on one palm and one wrist, which grated audibly. His huge feet kicked out and his arms gave way. He landed on his face, the wire from the headset tightened and the table on which the radio stood began to lean out from the wall. Donzey squalled and put out his arms to catch his darling; and catch it he did. His hands gripped the chassis, perfectly grounded, and as he hugged the set to him to save it, the upper terminal of a 6D6 tube contacted his chin. He suddenly felt as if a French 75 had gone off in his face. He saw several very pretty colors. One of them, he recalled later, looked like the smell of a rose, and another looked like a loud noise. He hit the floor with a bump, number instinct acting just far enough to twist his body under the precious radio. Nothing broke but the power line; and as soon as that parted, Farrel scrambled most profanely to his feet.

"Get up, you hind-end of a foot," he roared, "so I can slap you down again!"

"Wh-wh-whooee!" said Donzey's lungs, trying to get the knack of breathing again.

"Go away," breathed the quivering mass under the radio. Donzey waited a few seconds, and when Farrel still continued to hang over him, he decided to go on waiting. He knew that the canny old sheriff would never plow through a cash investment to get to him. As long as the radio was perched on his chest he was safe.

"Who you fink you're pwayin' twickf on?" said the sheriff through a rapidly swelling lip.

"I wasn't pwaying any twickf," mimicked Donzey. "Sizzle down, bud. What happened?"

"I ftarted to go cwavy, vat's all. What kind of devil'f gadget iv vat anyway?"

Sensing that the sheriff's anger was giving way to self-pity, Donzey took a chance on lifting the radio off himself. "My gosh, man—you're hurt!"

Farrel followed Donzey's eyes to his rapidly swelling wrist. "Yeah . . . I—Hey! It hurts!" he said, surprised.

"It should," said Donzey. While Farrel grunted, he bound it against a piece of board, and then went for a couple of ice cubes for the now balloon-like lip. As soon as Farrel was comfortable, Donzey started asking questions.

"What happened when I switched on the set?"

Farrel shuddered. "It was awful. I seen pictures."

"Pictures? You mean—pictures, like television?" Donzey's gadgeteer's heart leaped at the ideas that thronged into his cluttered mind. Maybe his set, by some odd circuiting, could induce broadcast television signals directly on the mind! Maybe he had invented an instrument for facilitating telepathy. Maybe he had stumbled on something

altogether new and unheard of. Any way you looked at it, there was millions in it. *Piker,* he told himself, *there's billions in it!*

"Nah," said Farrel. His face blanched; like many a bovine character before him he suddenly realized he had swallowed his cud.

"Don't worry about it," said the observant Donzey. "Chewing gum won't hurt you. Chew some more and forget it. Now, about those pictures—"

"Them . . . they wasn't like television. They wasn't like nothin' I ever heard about before. They were colored pictures—"

"Moving pictures?"

"Oh, yeah. But they were all foggy. Things close to me, they were clear. Anything more'n thirty feet away was—fuzzy."

"Like a camera out of focus?"

"Um. But things 'way far away, they were clear as a bell."

"What did you see?"

"Hills—fields. I didn't recognize that part of the country. But it all looked different. The grass was green, but sort of gray, too. An' the sky was just—blank. It all seemed good. I dunno—you won't laugh at me, Donzey?" asked the sheriff suddenly.

"Good gosh no!"

"Well, I was—*eatin'* the grass!" Farrel peered timidly at the mechanic and then seemed reassured. "It was queer. I couldn't figure time at all. I don't know how long it went on—might 'a' been years. Seemed like it was raining sometimes. Sometimes it was cold, an' that didn't bother me. Sometimes it was hot, and boy, that did."

"Are you telling me you *felt* things in those pictures?"

Farrel nodded soberly. "Donzey, I was *in* those pictures."

Donzey thought, *What have I got here? Transmigration? Teleportation? Clairvoyance? Why, there's ten billion in it!*

"What got me," said Farrel thoughtfully, "was that everything seemed so good. Until the end. There was miles of alleys, like, and then a great big dark building. I was scared, but everyone else seemed to be going my way, so I went along. Then some feller with a . . . a cleaver, he . . . I tried to get away, but I couldn't. He hit me. I hollered."

"I'll say you did." They shuddered together for a moment.

"That's all," said Farrel. "He hit me twice, and I woke up on the floor with a busted wing and saw you all mixed up with the radio. Now you tell me—what happened?"

"You seemed to go into a kind of trance. You hollered, and then started thrashing around. You did a high-dive onto the deck an' dragged the radio off the table. I caught it an' my chin hit it where it was hot. It knocked me silly. The whole thing didn't last twenty seconds."

"Donzey," said the sheriff, standing up, "you can keep the money I put into this thing. I don't want no more of it." He went to the door. "Course, if you should make a little money, don't forget who helped you get a start."

Donzey laughed. "I'll keep in touch with you," he said. "Look—about that big building you went into. You said you were scared, but everybody else was going the same way, so you went along. What were the others like?"

Farrel looked at him searchingly. "Did I say 'everybody else'?"

"You did."

"That's funny." Farrel scratched his head with his unbandaged arm. "All the rest of 'em was—sheep." And he went out.

For a long time after Farrel had gone, Donzey sat and stared at the radio. "Sheep," he muttered. He got up and set the transmitter carefully back on the table, rapidly checking over the wiring and tubes to see that all was safe and unbroken. "Sheep?" he asked himself. What had an FM radio to do with sheep? He put away his pliers and sal

ammoniac and solder and flux; hung his friction tape on its peg; picked up the soldering iron by the point and was reminded that it was still plugged in. He looked down at his scorched palm. "Sheep!" he said absently.

It wasn't anything you could just figure out, like what made an automobile engine squeak when you ran it more than two hundred miles without any oil, or why most of the lift comes from the top surface of an airplane's wing. It was something you had to try out, like getting drunk or falling in love. Donzey switched on the radio, sat down and picked up the headset. As he adjusted the crownpiece back down to man-size, he was struck by an ugly thought. Farrel had been in a bad way when he was inside this headset. He was—dreaming, was it?—that some guy was striking him with a cleaver just as he lurched forward and cut the juice. Suppose he hadn't cut it—would he have died, like the . . . the sheep he thought he was?

Donzey lay the earphones down and went into the bedroom for his alarm clock. Bolting it to the table, he wrapped a cord around the alarm key and led it to the radio switch. Then he set it carefully, so that it would go off in one minute and turn off the set. He put on the headset, waited twenty-five seconds, and turned it on. Fifteen seconds to warm up, and then—

It happened for him, too, that gray

grass and blank sky, the timelessness, the rain, the cold, the heat, and the sheep. The—*other* sheep. He ate the grass and it was good. He was frightened and milled with the others through those alleyways. He saw the dark building. He—and the alarm shrilled, the set clicked off, and he sat there sweating, a-tremble. This was bad. Oh, but bad.

Any money in it? Would anybody pay for pictures you could live in? And die in?

He had a wholesome urge to take his little humdinger—a machinist's hammer—and ding the hum out of the set. He got the better of the urge. He did, however, solemnly swear never to eat another bite of lamb or mutton. That noise Farrel had made—

Mutton? Wasn't there some mutton involved in the radio? He looked at it—at the phone condenser. An innocent-looking little piece of bone, hollow, with the tinfoil inside and out. Giggling without mirth, he took a piece of wire and shorted the homemade condenser out of the circuit, set his time switch, and put on the phones. Nothing happened. He reached over, snatched the wire away. Immediately he was eating gray-green grass under a blank sky, and it was good—good—and now the cold—and then the alarm, and he was back in his chair, staring at the mutton-bone condenser.

"That bone," he whispered, "just ain't dead yet!"

He went and stood at the front door, thinking of the unutterable horror of that dark building, the milling sheep. Farrel's sprained wrist. The mutton bone. "Somewhere, somehow," he told himself, "there's a hundred billion in it!"

Ringing a doorbell with a hand burdened by a huge bundle of groceries while the other is in a sling, presents difficulties, but Sheriff Farrel managed it. Turning the knob was harder, but Farrel managed that, too, when there was no response to the bell. From the inside room came the most appalling series of sounds—a chuckling, hysterical gabbling which rose in pitch until it was cut off with a frightful gurgling. Farrel tossed his burden on a seedy divan and ran into the workshop.

Donzey was lolling in the chair by the radio with the earphones on. His face was pale and his eyes were closed, and he twitched. The radio, in the two weeks since Farrel had seen it, had undergone considerable change. It was now compactly boxed in a black enameled sheet-iron box, from which protruded the controls and a pair of adjustable steel clips, which held what looked like a small white stick. The old speaker, the globular antenna, and all of the external spaghetti was gone. Among the dials on the control panel was that of a clock with a sweep second-hand. This and Donzey's twitching were the only movements in the room.

Suddenly the set clicked and Donzey went limp. Farrel gazed with sad apprehension at the mechanic, thinking that being his pallbearer would be little trouble.

"Donzey—"

Donzey shook his head and sat up. He was thinner, and his eyes told the sheriff that he was in the throes of something or other. He leaped up and pumped Farrel's good hand. "Just the man I wanted to see. It works, Farrel—it works!"

"Yeah, we're rich," said Farrel dourly. "I heard all that before. Heck with it. Come out o' here." He dragged Donzey into the living room and indicated the bundle on the divan. "Start in on that."

Donzey investigated. "What's this for?"

"Eatin', dope. The whole town's talkin' about you starvin' yourself. If I hadn't given you that money, you wouldn't have built that radio."

"Well, you don't have to feed me," said Donzey warmly.

"I feed any stray dog that follers me home," said Farrel. "An' I ain't re-

sponsible for 'em bein' hungry. Eat, now."

"Who said I was hungry?"

"Goes without sayin'. A guy that goes scrabblin' around Tookey's butcher shop lookin' for bones twice a day just ain't gettin' enough Vitamin B."

Donzey laughed richly, looked at the sheriff and laughed again. "Oh—that! I wasn't hungry!"

"Don't start pullin' the wool over my eyes. You'll eat that stuff or I'll spread it on the floor an roll you in it." He took the bag and upended it over the couch.

Donzey, with awe, looked at the bread, the butter, the preserves, canned fruit, steak, potatoes, lard, vegetables—"Farrel, for gosh sakes! Black market. It must be, for all that—"

"It ain't," said the sheriff grimly. He herded Donzey into the kitchen, brushed a lead-crucible and a miniature steam engine off the stove, and started to cook.

Donzey protested volubly until the steak started to sizzle, and then was stopped by an excess of salivary fluid. He was a little hungry, after all.

Farrel kept packing it in him until he couldn't move, and then sat down opposite and began to eye him coldly. "Now what's all this about?" he asked. "Why didn't you come to me for a handout?"

"I didn't need a handout," said Donzey, "and if I did I was too busy to notice it. Farrel, we've got the biggest thing of the century sitting in there!"

"It shoots a signal where you want it to, like you said?"

"Huh? What do you . . . oh, you mean the heaviside-beam thing? Nah," said Donzey with scorn. "Son, this is *big!*"

"Hm-m-m," said Farrel, looking at his sling. "But what good is it?"

"An entirely new school of thought will be built up around this thing," exulted Donzey. "It touches on philosophy, my boy, and metaphysics—the psychic sciences, even."

"What good is it?"

"Course, I can only guess on the whys and wherefores. When you came in, I was a chicken. I got my neck wrung. Sound silly? Well, it wouldn't to you . . . you *know*. But nobody else would believe me. I was a chicken—"

"What good is it?"

"—because between the clips I've built on the set I put a sliver of chicken bone. There was mutton on it when you tried it. I've been cattle and swine through that gadget, Farrel. I've been a sparrow and a bullfrog and an alley cat and a rock bass. I know how each one of them lived and died!"

"Swell," said Farrel. "But what good is it?"

"What good is it? How can you ask me such a question? Can't you think of anything but money?"

This sudden reversal caught Farrel right between the eyes. He rose with dignity, as if he were sitting on an elevator. "Donzey," he said, "you're a thief an' a robber, an' I don't want no more to do with you. Miz' Curtis was sayin' the other day that Donzey is a boy that's goin' places. I guess it's up to me to tell you where to go." He told him and stamped out.

Donzey laughed, reached for a toothpick and set about enjoying the last of that delicious steak. Farrel was a nice guy, but he lacked imagination.

Come to think of it, what good *was* the gadget?

Two hours later a small package was delivered. It contained a note and a splinter of bone. The note read:

I know I'm bein a fool, but I can't forget the first time I met that FM thing of yours. Maybe for once in your life you can put one of your contraptions to work.

Seems as how Bill Kelley just was in here wantin me to trace his wife Eula. They been havin fights—well, you know Bill, he always treated her like she was in third grade. I often wondered why she didn't take out a long time ago, the way he used to smack her around and all, and seems like she did.

Bill allows she has run out with somebody, he don't know who. Anyway, right after he left a deputy comes in and says he has found Eula out on the highway in her car. Says

she is all busted up. I drove out there and sure enough there she is. She is all by herself and she is dead. Car climbed a power pole on the wrong side of a cyclone fence. What I want you to find out is whether there was anyone with her. She had a compound fracture and it wasnt no trouble to get this sample. See what you can get.

FARREL.

with, but he would rather have had an anonymous one. He had known Eula Kelley for years. Farrel's clumsy note didn't begin to state the tragedy of her life since she married the town's rich man. She was a Kelley, and she had been a Walsh before that, and he wasn't

Donzey realized that he still had the bone splinter in his hand. He laid it quickly on the table and stared at it as if he expected it to moan at him. He had known for some time that he would have to get a human bone to experiment

surprised that she had finally decided to leave him. But it didn't make sense that she had left with another man. Not Eula.

Feeling a little sick, Donzey clipped the bone into his machine, set it for

twenty seconds, put on the 'phones and threw the switch. He sat quite still until it clicked off, and then, white and shaken, adjusted the time switch for forty seconds. Once again he "listened," then made his final setting of fifty-two seconds—enough to take him right up to the mental image of Eula's death. More than that he dared not do. His great fear was that some day his psychic identification with the bone's individuality would be carried with it into death.

Farrel arrived and found him sitting on the steps, his jaw muscles knotting furiously, his sharp eyes full of puzzled anger. Farrel left a deputy in his car and went inside with Donzey.

"Get anything?" he asked.

"Plenty. Farrel, that Bill Kelley ought to be shot, and I'd like to do the shooting."

"Yeah. He's a louse. That ain't our affair. Was there anyone with her?"

"I—think there was. You better see for yourself."

Farrel shot him a quizzical glance and then sat down beside the machine. Donzey turned it on as the sheriff donned the headset, and then sat back, watching. He was sorry that he had to put Farrel through it, but he felt that the sheriff should know the story that splinter had to tell. His mind ran back over Eula's idea-patterns, the images they yielded. It was a story of incredible sordidness, and of a man's utter cruelty to a woman. It told of the things he had done, things he had said. Eula had borne it and borne it, and her ego had slowly been crushed under the weight of it. Then there was that last terrible incident, and she had run away from him. It didn't matter where she was running to, as long as it was away. And there was the flight of hope, the complete death of relief, when she realized, out there on the highway, that there was no escape. Bill Kelley's mark was on her; she couldn't leave him or her life with him. She knew exactly what she was doing when she threw the wheel hard over and closed her eyes against the beginnings of that tearing crash.

The set clicked off. Farrel stared at Donzey, and drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"It don't seem right, Donzey, knowing things like that about a woman. I always knew Bill was a snake, but—"

"Yeah," said Donzey. "I know."

Farrel peeled off the headset and went to the door. "Harry," he called to his deputy, "go get Bill Kelley."

"What's that for?" asked Donzey when he returned.

"Strictly outside the law," said Farrel very quietly, "I'm goin' to give Bill Kelley somethin' he needs." He took off his badge and laid it on the bench.

Donzey suddenly remembered hearing that, years ago, Eula Walsh had married Bill Kelley when she was engaged to Farrel. He wondered if he would have called Farrel in if he had remembered that before, and decided that he would have.

"Farrel," he said after a time, "about that other person in the car—"

Farrel's big head came up. "That's right—there was somebody—I got just the impression of it, just before the crash. I don't rightly remember—seems like it was someone I know, though."

"Me, too. I can't understand it, Farrel. She wasn't running away with anybody. She wasn't interested in anybody or anything except in getting away. I didn't get any intimation of her meeting anyone, or even being with anyone until that last few seconds."

"That's right. What did he look like?"

"Sort of . . . well, medium sized and . . . damn if I remember. But I don't think I've seen him before."

"I haven't, either," said Donzey. "I don't know that it's really important. If she ran away with somebody, she rated it. I don't think she did, but . . . heck, he was probably just a hitchhiker that she was too upset to think about," he finished lamely.

"A woman don't commit sideways with a stranger along," Farrel said.

"A woman's liable to do anything after she's been through what Eula went through." The doorbell pealed. "That'll be Kelley."

As Farrel went to the door, Donzey noticed that his palms were wet. Farrel opened the door and the deputy's voice drifted in: "I saw Kelley, sheriff. He wouldn't come."

"He wouldn't come? Why?"

Harry's voice was aggrieved. "Aw, he seemed to have a wild hair up his nose. Got real mad. Started foamin' at the mouth. Said by golly the police were public servants. Said he wasn't used to bein' ordered around like a criminal. Said if you want to see him you got to come to him, or prove he committed a crime. Sour-castic son-of-a-gun."

"That ain't all he is," said Farrel. "Forget it, Harry. Shove off. I'll walk into town when I'm through here." He banged the door. "Donzey, we're goin' to fix that feller."

Donzey didn't like to see a big, easy-going lug like Farrel wearing that icy grin. The huge hands that pinned the badge back in its place shook ever so little.

"Sure," said Donzey futilely, "Sure—we'll get him."

Farrel spun on his heel as if Kelley's face were under it, and stalked out.

It was about three days later that one of Farrel's stooges at the county hospital sent up a bone specimen from an appendicitis death. Attached was a brief case history:

Cause of death, appendicitis. Age, about forty; male. Appendix ruptured suddenly in Sessions Restaurant at 8:30 p. m. Went on operating table about 9:15. Doctor in charge administered adrenalin by pericardial hypodermic. Patient roused sufficiently to allow operation. Removal of appendix and sponging of peritoneum successful. Death by post-operative hemorrhage, 9:28.

"We have," muttered Donzey as he clipped the bone into the machine, "a little scientist in our midst. Ol' Doc Grinniver up to his tricks again! A ruptured appendix and he tosses in a jolt of adrenalin to 'rouse' the patient, in the meantime making his heart pump poison all over his body, high-pressure." He picked up his earphones and glanced at the report again. "'Post-operative hemorrhage' my blue eyeballs! That was peritonitis! Oh, well, I guess he would have died anyway, and I guess the old butcher couldn't get hold of a guinea pig with appendicitis." He sat down at the machine, adjusted the time switch, and his mind slipped into the bone emanations.

It was the usual life-and-death story, but with a difference. The man had been in the midst of a slimy little office intrigue which seemed to have taken command of most of his thoughts in the last few months; but the ragged stab of pain when his appendix burst drove all that out. Pain is like that, and Donzey had found that people handled it in two ways. They let it pile up on them until it suffocated them, or they floated up and up in it until it supported them; they lay in it like a bed. The second way, though, required a knack which took years to develop, and Donzey was glad he could learn it from other people's experience.

This particular case took it the first way, and it wasn't very nice. The agony grew and dimmed all his senses except the one that feels pain; and that grew. Pretty soon he couldn't even think. But when it got past that stage, it began to overwhelm his sensories, too, and the pain lessened. His eyes were open—had been, because he realized that his eyeballs were dry—but he slowly began to see again. Someone was bending over him. He was on the operating table. He had been to the movies, and he never remembered seeing anyone in dark clothes around an operating table before. And as his vision strengthened and the figure became clearer and

clearer, he felt first curiosity, then awe, then the absolute, outside utmost in terror. Like a beam of negative energy, he felt it soaking up the heat of his body, his very life. It was a huge and monstrous thing. He had strength for just one thing; he closed his eyes just a tenth of a second before the dark one's face swam into focus; and then, in the same instant, the doctor's needle entered his heart. The warmth flowed back weakly, and when he dared to open his eyes again the dark one was gone.

And then the operation; and he felt every scrape and slice of it. When Donzey thought about it afterward, he felt his own appendix literally squirm in sympathy—not an experience measuring up to the highest standards of animal comfort. Soon enough it was over, and the set clicked off with a nice life margin of two minutes to go.

Donzey sat for a long time thinking this over. His was a mechanic's mind, and such a mind seldom rejects anything because it has never heard of it before, or because it has heard otherwise. This machine now—it proposed certain very important questions. Donzey spread the questions out on a blank spot in his brain and looked at them.

The machine showed what Death felt like, just before it happened. That was the really valuable point—it *happened*. It wasn't a light going out. It was a force swinging into action, so strong that it could impress itself on the carefully constructed thought-patterns mysteriously apparent in bones. All right—

What was this force called Death?

Donzey thought of that dark figure in the operating theater of the county hospital, and knew without a doubt that that question was answered. He was very happy that the late possessor of that piece of bone had had the consideration to close his eyes before he had taken a good look. Or was it the adrenalin that drove the dark thing out of sight? What had being in sight to do with death? Did looking on the Dark One—the capitalization was Donzey's—result in death? Could that be it? Were sickness and accidents merely phenomena that gave man the power to see death? And was that sight the thing that took their life force out of their now useless bodies? And—

Would seeing Death in the machine kill a man?

Donzey looked respectfully at the machine and thought, "I could easy enough try it and find out," without making the slightest move to do so.

Farrel arrived that evening, and for once the grim old man looked benignly happy. He clapped Donzey on the back, smiled, and sat down wordlessly.

"If I know you, Farrel," said Donzey, "all that showing of the teeth means that you are about to be real unkind to someone. It wouldn't be me, would it?"

"In a way," said the sheriff. "I'm

goin' to bust up your place a little. You won't mind that, will you?"

"Nah," said Donzey, wondering what this was all about. "What are you going to bust up, what with, and why?"

"Answerin' your questions in order," said Farrel, grinning hugely, "Whatever gets in my way while I'm playing, a certain Mr. William Kelley, and you know as well as I do."

"Oh," Donzey rubbed his hands together. "So he's coming here? Or are you having him shipped by express?"

"He's coming of his own free will. He dropped into my office this morning and breezed up the place with a lot of noise about my not finding out who his wife ran away with. She's dead and he don't care about that. What makes him mad is that all these years he's been supporting a woman who— You know Bill Kelley."

Donzey felt a little sick. "How can a man be so rock-bottom lousy?"

"Aw, he's been practicing for years. Anyhow, I calmed him down and told him I knew a feller . . . that's you . . . who had found out who was in the car with his wife. I told him to come over at eight-thirty and see you. You can shove along now or stay and see the fun. This is the one place in town where I know I can do what I want, without being interrupted."

"Which is—"

"Just what happened to Eula. She was rushing along in her car; she turned over and got all smashed up. I'm goin' to turn him over and smash him up." Farrel's smile was positively childlike.

"I'll stick around and watch," said Donzey. "By the way—" He hesitated.

"What?"

"I do know who was in the car with Eula."

"Yeah? Who?"

Donzey told him. "You don't say," said Farrel. "Well, well. Skull an' a scythe, an' all that?"

"Nah," said Donzey. "That's just a picture somebody drew. Looks as much like Him as a political cartoon does of a presidential candidate." The doorbell rang. "Farrel," said Donzey quickly, "I want him to see Eula's bone picture. Of all people in the world, he ought to appreciate it the most. Please."

Farrel said thoughtfully, "That'll be O. K. Then I don't have to explain nothin'. When the machine's through, I'll start, an' he'll know just why."

Donzey went to the door and let in a superbly tailored gray sports suit with a pin-checked topcoat which contained an overload of pig eyes, flabby jowls and a voice like a fingernail on a piece of slate. Bill Kelley stamped past Donzey as if he were a butler or even a photo-electric door opener. He had apparently started griping even before he rang the bell, because he entered in the middle of a sentence.

"—come to a hovel like this on a wild-goose chase just because a fool of a sheriff can't get any information. I'm going to find out how much of my taxes goes to keep that fellow in office, and get an exemption. I'm the public, dammit, and I ought to be able to deal with a public servant. Hello, Farrel. What's all this nonsense, now?"

Farrel's voice cut through Kelley's because it was so deep and so very quiet. "That little man behind you is the guy I was tellin' you about. He's seen the man in Eu . . . Mrs. Kelley's car."

"Oh. Well? Well? Speak up, man. Who was it? If he's in business, I'll break him. If he's on relief, I'll have him taken off. If he's the kind of worthless tramp Eula would probably take up with, I'll hire some muscles I know to take care of him. Well? Well?"

"You can see him for yourself, *Mr.* Kelley," said Donzey evenly.

"I don't want to see him!" stormed Kelley. "Is he here?" He peered around.

Donzey had a flash of him grunting and wallowing in mud. "Not exactly. Sit down over there, and I'll show you a sort of moving picture."

Kelley opened his mouth to protest but found himself lifted off the floor, swung around and dropped into a chair. He squealed indignantly, saw Farrel's great horse face hovering close to his, turned a pinkish shade of gray and shut his mouth.

"Easy, Farrel," said Donzey gently, and put the earphones on Bill Kelley. Rummaging through his new filing cabinet, he clipped a specimen onto the machine and turned on the switch. Kelley's eyes closed.

They stood looking at their prisoner.

"Farrel—" said Donzey smoothly. The sheriff looked up. "What I was saying before he came . . . I've been wondering if it isn't the sight of Death that actually takes the . . . the soul out of a man."

Farrel grunted and turned back to Kelley. He was following the man's mind through that tragic maze of Eula's life. His jaw muscles kept knotting and slackening, beating like a heart.

Kelley suddenly stiffened. His eyes opened wide—so wide that the lids seemed about to fold back on themselves. The man's horrified gaze was directed at them, but they both sensed that he saw neither of them. For a full minute no one in the room moved.

"He's seen the show," muttered Farrel. "What's he doing—stalling?" Then he realized that Kelley's staring eyes weren't looking at anything any more.

Donzey nodded. "Yup," he said, "it's seeing Him does it."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Why," said Donzey, "I reckon he climbed into that car with Eula. You see, I didn't set the time switch."

"Oh," said Farrel. He went and lifted up Kelley's wrist. "*Tsk, tsk.* Whaddye know. This here guy's up an' died on us. Heh! In a automobile accident that happened more'n a week ago!"

THE END.

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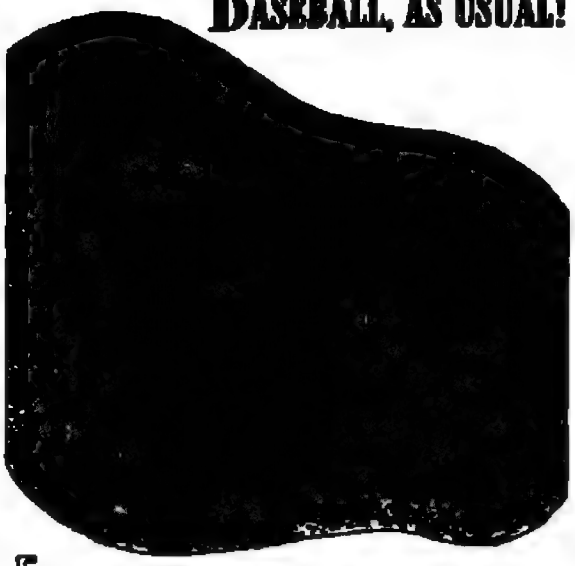

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One Man's Harp

by Babette Rosmond

A professional gambler will take a chance on anything—even a chance at winning another man's place in Heaven. But it might be that what he was wasn't Heaven—to him.

– Illustrated by Fax

Harry Jordan put down his magazine and listened politely to the man in the next chair who'd been talking to him on and off for the last hour. The man seemed to be aware of one subject only: skiing. Harry Jordan knew what a ski was, he knew where Sun Valley was—his neighbor's destination—and he knew he hated snow. Outside of that, he knew nothing and cared less. He was bored; it was time to be getting to work on this tanned, tall and patently ingenuous stranger.

"These trains certainly are slow," sighed his neighbor. He yawned extensively. "Wish there was something exciting to do."

"Well," suggested Jordan carefully, "I don't know how much excitement I can promise you with my brand of card playing—never touch the stuff except when I'm driven to it—but how about a friendly little game?"

"Well! That sounds fine," said his neighbor with enthusiasm. "My name's Taft, by the way. Gene Taft. Olympics. Skiing team."

"Oh, yes," said Jordan. "I'm Harry Jordan. Pleased to meet you." His hands were beginning to itch. "Gin rummy O. K.?" he asked. "It's about the only game I know. Two cents a point suit you?"

Taft nodded and showed fine white teeth in a big smile.

"Boy, this is going to be a cinch," he said. "Hate to take your money."

Jordan grinned and rang for the porter, who returned with two new decks. Jordan slid the cards out on the table that the porter rigged up between their seats and picked the jokers out of the decks. Then he shuffled the cards clumsily. They cut for deal, and the high card fell to Jordan. He dealt ten cards to each, picked up his own and expertly separated two aces from the others. As he placed them at one end of his hand he lightly ran his fingernail over a corner of each, cutting a ridge perceptible only to his trained fingertips. He stifled a yawn and settled down to the game. It was such routine stuff that his air of disinterest was completely real.

They played for a half hour. Taft was winning. When he was thirty-five dollars ahead, Jordan had marked the deck to his own satisfaction and good-

naturedly proposed that they raise the stakes to five cents a point. In another hour the stakes were raised to twenty-five cents a point. Languidly, Jordan came in for the kill. Taft found himself unable to fill a single sequence. Every card he dropped was picked up by Jordan. The score rose higher and higher and all the scoring was on Jordan's side of the sheet. Finally Jordan added up an astounding column of figures.

"My, my," he said, with a look of amazement that would have registered as pure corn with anyone else but Taft. "I seem to be winning. Imagine. That's forty-seven hundred you owe me."

Taft looked a little pale under his magnificent tan, but his tone was quiet. "That happens to be just four hundred

dollars more than I have or could raise. He reached into his pocket and drew out a bank book. "There's forty-three hundred dollars in this account, and it was supposed to keep me until the end of the year. Which means I owe you four hundred I don't have, and that I'm short another four hundred for this"—and here his voice broke a little—"for this skiing trip."

He raised his eyes to Jordan. "Tell you what. I'll cut you for eight hundred dollars, high card takes all. If I win, you'll give me back the four hundred I need and we'll be even on what I owe you. If I lose—"

"Yes," interrupted Jordan, smiling benignly. "If you lose?"

"If I lose," said Taft, evenly, "I'll transfer you—my share of Paradise!"

Jordan stared at Taft. "Out of all the suckers on this train, I have to pick this whack," he thought. "Paradise he wants to give me. Could I get a liquor license in Paradise, could I get a floor show going there, could I fix deals with The Boys there? Well, I'll be off this train in about ten minutes. I might as well take what I can get. At least the cops won't ever nail me with it."

"Ha, ha," he said aloud, showing very bad, jagged, little, dirty teeth. "Eight hundred dollars. Against your share of Paradise."

Taft extended his hand toward the stack of cards. He hesitated for a fraction of a second and then pulled out a card. It was the ten of diamonds. He flipped it face up on the table and watched Jordan's hand move toward the deck. Jordan cut the cards. The card facing Taft was the jack of hearts.

Taft looked solemn.

"That's it," he said. "O. K. With all due respects to Those who arrange such affairs, I hereby confer upon you my share of Paradise as of this moment. All the good that was to befall me is now yours."

He had just about finished his sentence when there was a nerve-chilling screech of steel against steel. Jordan rushed to the window. Headed toward them, at a miraculous, terrifying and inevitable speed, was the blinding headlight of another engine. How the tracks had branched Jordan never had time to figure out. In another moment the trains had thundered together and Jordan was smashed with sickening force against the floor of the Pullman car.

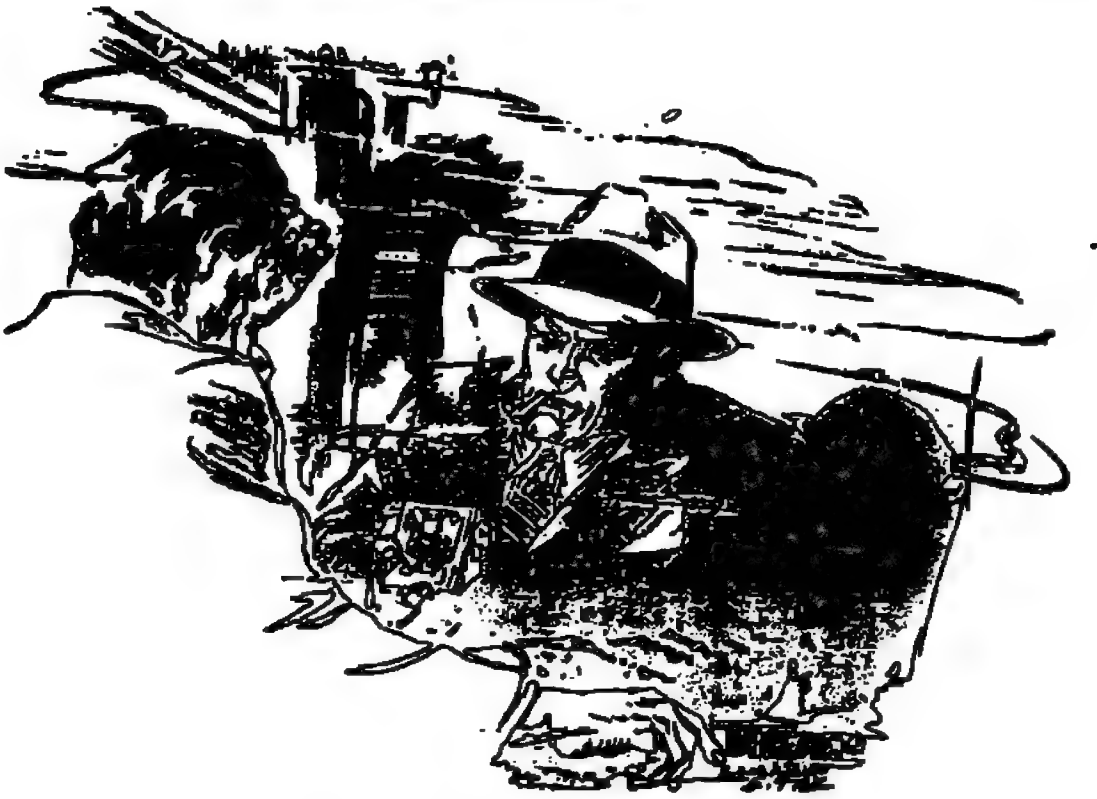
Jordan picked himself up from the snow-covered ground and brushed some flakes off his right leg. He felt cold, and more important, he felt lonely—unutterably lonely. He was not at all reassured to find that at the end of his right leg there was a ski. Beyond the ski, his leg seemed to be clothed with a close-fitting silky green trouser tacked into a woolen sock. His foot was covered by a bulky shoe which, in turn, was thrust into the metal and leather strips which bound it to the ski.

He looked around him. He was alone on a vast snow-covered mountain. Stretching down at a thirty-degree angle from where he stood was an icy slope studded with tree stumps and scattered boulders. He tried to find tracks on the thick snow, but couldn't. He realized he must have arrived somewhat unconventionally.

He removed his skis, with difficulty, and trudged up the hill, slipping frequently. Several hundred feet higher he found the trail of skis, which disappeared and then reappeared at the very spot where he had been a few moments before. He saw in his mind the picture of an intrepid skier, hurtling down the mountain—like in the movies—coming to earth on the rim of disaster on a tiny shelf overhanging the valley. A bitter wind chilled him to the core, as he started to climb the hill; then, suddenly he stopped. There was no one else about. It was he who had been standing on the landing marks of the skis.

That intrepid skier, that defier of death, had been himself.

Shivering with fright and cold, he continued his climb. In about half an



hour he saw a curl of smoke. His feet, by then, felt as if he had left them off that morning; his ski boots were saturated with icy water. Through the tattered folds of his pants his blue knees poked, lacerated and bleeding from frequent contact with the sharp snow crust.

The smoke was coming from the chimney of a long, low house. Jordan swung open the door without knocking. His heart leaped at the beautiful sight before him. A great fire was crackling in a massive fireplace. Several assorted ski suits, with people in them, were sitting around the fire, drinking hot rum. Jordan staggered to a fine, big leather couch and collapsed.

A servant in a white jacket unlaced Jordan's boots and drew them from his feet, which had returned but were not yet really feet: just clumps of ice. He thrust a mug into Jordan's hand and waited until Jordan had drained it before he spoke:

"My, you're late. We expected you at least an hour ago."

Jordan looked at him. "How did you know I was coming? I'm sure *I* didn't."

The servant looked scornful.

"Now, now, stop with the Here-Comes-Mr.-Jordan stuff. We're all very tired of being whimsied up in the movies. However, you are most welcome here. Everyone respects and admires Gene Taft."

"Taft, Taft?" Jordan rubbed his head. "Where is this? Sun Valley?"

"No, sir. This is Paradise."

And then, of course, Jordan remembered. This was Gene Taft's share of Paradise. This was what he had won in a gin-rummy game.

Jordan looked around him. No one seemed particularly ethereal. Everyone wore old shirts, worn slippers, slacks, jackets and other things which he had known about, dimly, but had never

worn. The women were husky but beautiful. Six of them were staring at him, invitingly. Jordan felt better.

One of the women sat next to him. As she bounced reassuringly against him he noticed a trace of perfume. He felt lots better. This was familiar stuff.

"That's nice perfume, sister," he said in his best Humphrey Bogart manner.

The woman smiled and moved closer to him.

"I'm glad you like it," she said, "I've been waiting for you. I've admired you for years. I remember you in the Olympics. My name is Sally Ransome."

Jordan would have liked to continue the conversation, but he felt unreasonably tired. Murmuring excuses, he allowed himself to be led upstairs by the servant. He sank into a bed, and knew nothing until, hours later, a hand tapped his shoulder.

He opened his eyes. He was conscious of pain. Every muscle ached. His face felt like stretched leather; his lips were cracked and bleeding.

The white-coated servant was standing at his bedside. Beyond him, the open window looked out upon the valley. The first rays of light were rising from a sun which had not yet come up.

"It's five thirty, sir," whispered the servant. "I let you sleep longer this morning."

Then the servant pulled him from his bed and led him across the cold floor to a bathroom. Half asleep, he felt himself being stripped of his pajamas and placed under a shower. Then the icicles hit him. Sharp and frigid, they drove into his back and face and limbs. He leaped into the air in agony as the cold, cold deluge met his blistered legs. He was almost unconscious by the time the servant started rubbing him with a rough towel. Jordan broke away and ran back into bed.

"Say, look, bub," he said to the servant. "I don't know who told you to call me, but don't. Don't wake me at five, don't wake me at six. And don't wake me at eleven unless I tell you that I want to get up very, very early in the morning.

"And I don't bathe in the morning. I bathe at night. I do not bathe in ice; I bathe in warm water. If there is anything that I do not like, that is cold water. Now go away. I am a sick man. I am a cold and sick man."

The servant stood there, smiling.

"Oh, you skiers. You will have your little joke. Why, Mr. Taft, you know as well as I do that you'll be getting up every morning at five and taking your nice cold shower. You'll do it all the time, if you'll pardon a colloquialism. Time really means eternity, you know. And now your massage, sir."

There followed an unspeakable half hour of torture, during which Jordan felt as though he were a professional demonstrator of Iron Marys.

Finally, somehow, Jordan dressed. He went down into the dining room, where only Sally Ransome was left.

She smiled a welcome. "I thought you were never coming. I'd have been out an hour ago but I didn't want you to eat alone. Isn't this a honey of a day?"

"I," said Jordan, "have known better."

"Yes," she went on, "it's glorious here. Every day is colder than the one before it. After you're here ten years or so, you'll find that it will seem like fifty degrees below zero! Imagine how grand the snow is then."

Jordan frowned at Sally, and ordered some orange juice. The servant brought it in a pint-sized glass, and asked if he would have oatmeal or farina, and did he prefer ham or sausages with his eggs?

"I will have one cup of black coffee," said Jordan. "Black."

The servant tittered.

"You're a one, sir. First joking about your shower and now— Why, first thing we know you'll be asking for a cigar!"

Sally giggled.

"You are funny, Mr. Taft. Why, the

oatmeal is wonderful this morning. I had two bowls. Lots of brown sugar and I think the cook has mixed in some raw eggs. Jensen, bring Mr. Taft the works!"

She laughed again. Beautiful as she was, Jordan felt slightly revolted at that laughter. Then Jensen brought breakfast. The oatmeal looked as if it were prepared for a hungry family of twelve; the hot milk had skin floating on it.

Jordan swallowed his nausea and said quickly:

"You'll think this is foolish, I know, but isn't there something else we could do today besides ski?"

"Silly boy! As if we could do anything here *but* ski! Just try to do anything else, and you'll see what happens. Why, you could *not* ski if you wanted to—which you don't, of course!

"You know," Sally chattered on and on as he ate, "the funniest thing happened the other day. I was out with Mr. James and we stopped for lunch. It was really hot—only ten below—so we took off our jackets to cool off and found some nice lumps of ice to curl up on. Well, by the time we'd finished, I looked around and our jackets just weren't there any more. Then I realized we'd been sitting on a glacier and it had just moved us along with it. Well, Mr. James had to carry me up because the snow was too deep to walk—and he was *puffing* when we got there. Imagine a man not able to carry me up a hill for a couple of miles on skis without puffing? I only weigh a hundred and forty. Do you think that's too light for cross-country runs?"

"Er, you say we don't come back for lunch?" asked Jordan.

"Oh, no. The lodge simply isn't here in the daytime. It disappears. Comes back about five o'clock. Oh, do hurry! I want you to show me so many things today."

"I suppose," said Jordan, cleverly, "this being Paradise, no one ever gets in, well, any skiing accidents?"

"Oh, you!" Sally laughed. And now

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Jordan hated her and wished she and her laugh were inside a glacier with oatmeal and brown sugar. "Of course we can't die. But if any of us are stupid enough to blunder in the snow, we get hurt. Not that many of us do; but occasionally some fool breaks his leg and has to wait weeks before another one grows. But we're all professionals here, so there's not much danger—even though there's a punishment for those who try to take it easy."

"Punishment," mumbled Jordan. Then he looked around. He was sitting in the snow.

"See," laughed Sally. "I told you the lodge disappeared during the day. Come on, let's ski!"

"Excuse me just a moment," said Jordan. "Got to see a man. Be right back."

He dashed behind a tree stump out of Sally's sight and sat down, panting. What manner of game was this, what doom had he bargained for? Was this icy mess Paradise? Was this the land of milk and honey? No, this was the land of oatmeal and ice—and he would have none of it. Better hell than this. Better nice warm hell fires than fifty below zero. This might be heaven for Gene Taft, wherever he was now—probably enjoying himself in some celestial burlesque house, smoking cigars and drinking gin—but for him it was—

Why not? The thought hit him full in the stomach, or at least in the cold region where a stomach had once functioned. Perhaps he could arrange something with—well, call him Satan. People did it. They made bargains. And Jordan knew that whatever happened to him now, he'd be getting the best of the bargain. But how did one summon Satan?

Remembering dimly something he had once read, he drew a crude circle in the snow. Then he started mumbling to himself, "Please, Satan, honey, come up here just a minute, please, Satan, just this once, be a good guy, you don't know what I'd do to leave this heavenhole, honey, please."

The man standing before him was tall and slim and dressed in a snappy white linen suit.

"I'm delighted to see you, sir," said Jordan sincerely.

"Well, what's this?" asked Satan. "Want to trade heaven for hell, do you? Crazy. But that's your affair."

"Pardon me," said Jordan, beginning to feel like a new man, "but aren't you supposed to wear black? Or red?"

"Quit reading dime magazines," said Satan. "Don't you wear white suits in the summer? Well, it's plenty hot where I live. So I wear them."

"That reminds me," said Jordan. "If I come to you . . . if I trade this no-good heaven for a nice, personal hell—I'd like to have you promise me that it won't get too hot. Say, nothing over ninety degrees."

"Done," said Satan. "You won't find it too hot. It'll be a nice, personal hell, that's all. After all, Jordan, I've had my eye on you for years. You crossed me up in that gin-rummy game, all right. I thought sure I'd get you for some of the things you've done. Hiring killers, driving people to suicide on account of gambling debts. Oh, you certainly fooled me with that Taft switch. But I'm a good sport. I don't hold grudges. Come on, let's get out of here. You'll get your own hell—at your own request."

Jordan's head began to ache. He grew dizzy. The snow melted around him and swirled in pretty patterns over his head. Then there was a period of blackness. Then a great light. Then—

Jordan picked himself up from the snow-covered ground. He looked around him. He was quite alone on a vast snow-covered mountain. He looked down. There was a ski at the end of his leg. He began to sob.

THE END.

They Bite

by Anthony Boucher

They may have been Carkers, or maybe Benders—but legend said they bit, anyway. The spy figured that was camouflage for him, and moved into the old place—

Illustrated by Kramer

There was no path, only the almost vertical ascent. Crumbled rock for a few yards, with the roots of sage finding their scanty life in the dry soil. Then jagged outcroppings of crude crags, sometimes with accidental footholds, sometimes with overhanging and untrustworthy branches of greasewood, sometimes with no aid to climbing but the leverage of your muscles and the ingenuity of your balance.

The sage was as drably green as the rock was drably brown. The only color was the occasional rosy spikes of a barrel cactus. The earth was dry, and the wind was dry and cold.

Hugh Tallant swung himself up on to the last pinnacle. It had a deliberate, shaped look about it—a petrified fortress of Lilliputians, a Gibraltar of pygmies. Tallant perched on its battlements and unslung his field glasses.

The desert valley spread below him. The tiny cluster of buildings that was Oasis, the exiguous cluster of palms that gave name to the town and shelter to his own tent and to the shack he was building, the dead-ended highway leading straightforwardly to nothing, the oiled roads diagramming the vacant blocks of an optimistic subdivision.

Tallant saw none of these. His glasses were fixed beyond the oasis and the town of Oasis on the dry lake. The gliders were clear and vivid to him, and the uniformed men busy with them were as sharply and minutely visible as a nest of ants under glass. The training school was more than usually active. One glider in particular, strange to Tallant, seemed the focus of attention. Men would come and examine it and glance back at the older models in comparison.

Only the corner of Tallant's left eye was not preoccupied with the new glider. In that corner something moved, something little and thin and brown as the earth. Too large for a rabbit, much too small for a man. It darted across that corner of vision, and Tallant found gliders oddly hard to concentrate on.

He set down the bifocals and deliberately looked about him. His pinnacle surveyed the narrow, flat area of the crest. Nothing stirred. Nothing stood out against the sage and rock but one barrel of rosy spikes. He took up the glasses again and resumed his observations. When he was done, he methodically entered the results in the little black notebook.

His hand was still white. The desert

is cold and often sunless in winter. But it was a firm hand, and as well trained as his eyes, fully capable of recording faithfully the designs and dimensions which they had registered so accurately.

Once his hand slipped, and he had to erase and redraw, leaving a smudge that displeased him. The lean, brown thing had slipped across the edge of his vision again. Going toward the east edge, he would swear, where that set of rocks jutted like the spines on the back of a stegosaur.

Only when his notes were completed did he yield to curiosity, and even then with cynical self-reproach. He was physically tired, for him an unusual state, from this daily climbing and from clearing the ground for his shack-to-be. The eye muscles play odd nervous tricks. There could be nothing behind the stegosaur's armor.

There was nothing. Nothing alive and moving. Only the torn and half-plucked carcass of a bird, which looked as though it had been gnawed by some small animal.

It was halfway down the hill—hill in Western terminology, though anywhere east of the Rockies it would have been considered a sizable mountain—that Tallant again had a glimpse of a moving figure.

But this was no trick of a nervous eye. It was not little nor thin nor brown. It was tall and broad and wore a loud red-and-black lumberjack. It bellowed "Tallant!" in a cheerful and lusty voice.

Tallant drew near the man and said "Hello." He paused and added, "Your advantage, I think."

The man grinned broadly. "Don't know me? Well, I daresay ten years is a long time, and the California desert ain't exactly the Chinese rice fields. How's stuff? Still loaded down with Secrets for Sale?"

Tallant tried desperately not to react to that shot, but he stiffened a little. "Sorry. The prospector getup had me fooled. Good to see you again, Morgan."

The man's eyes had narrowed. "Just having my little joke," he smiled. "Of course you wouldn't have no serious reason for mountain-climbing around a glider school, now would you? And you'd kind of need field glasses to keep an eye on the pretty birdies."

"I'm out here for my health." Tallant's voice sounded unnatural even to himself.

"Sure, sure. You were always in it for your health. And come to think of it, my own health ain't been none too good lately. I've got me a little cabin way to hell-and-gone around here, and I do me a little prospecting now and then. And somehow it just strikes me, Tallant, like maybe I hit a pretty good lode today."

"Nonsense, old man. You can see—"

"I'd sure hate to tell any of them Army men out at the field some of the stories I know about China and the kind of men I used to know out there. Wouldn't cotton to them stories a bit, the Army wouldn't But if I was to have a drink too many and get talkative-like—"

"Tell you what," Tallant suggested brusquely. "It's getting near sunset now, and my tent's chilly for evening visits. But drop around in the morning and we'll talk over old times. Is rum still your tipple?"

"Sure is. Kind of expensive now, you understand—"

"I'll lay some in. You can find the place easily—over by the oasis. And we . . . we might be able to talk about your prospecting, too."

Tallant's thin lips were set firm as he walked away.

. . .

The bartender opened a bottle of beer and plunged it on the damp-circled counter. "That'll be twenty cents," he said, then added as an afterthought, "Want a glass? Sometimes tourists do."

Tallant looked at the others sitting at

the counter—the red-eyed and unshaven old man, the flight sergeant unhappily drinking a coke—it was after Army hours for beer—the young man with the long, dirty trench coat and the pipe and the new-looking brown beard—and saw no glasses. "I guess I won't be a tourist," he decided.

This was the first time Tallant had had a chance to visit the Desert Sport Spot. It was as well to be seen around in a community. Otherwise people begin to wonder and say, "Who is that man out by the oasis? Why don't you ever see him any place?"

The Sport Spot was quiet that night. The four of them at the counter, two Army boys shooting pool, and a half dozen of the local men gathered about a round poker table, soberly and wordlessly cleaning a construction worker whose mind seemed more on his beer than on his cards.

"You just passing through?" the bartender asked sociably.

Tallant shook his head. "I'm moving in. When the Army turned me down for my lungs I decided I better do something about it. Heard so much about your climate here I thought I might as well try it."

"Sure thing," the bartender nodded. "You take up until they started this glider school, just about every other guy you meet in the desert is here for his health. Me, I had sinus, and look at me now. It's the air."

Tallant breathed the atmosphere of smoke and beer suds, but did not smile. "I'm looking forward to miracles."

"You'll get 'em. Whereabouts you staying?"

"Over that way a bit. The agent called it 'the old Carker place.'"

Tallant felt the curious listening silence and frowned. The bartender had

started to speak and then thought better of it. The young man with the beard looked at him oddly. The old man fixed him with red and watery eyes that had a faded glint of pity in them. For a moment Tallant felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air of the desert. Then the construction worker in the poker game brandished an empty bottle and yelled "Hi!" The bartender turned to fill the order, and the cold instant melted.

The old man drank his beer in quick gulps, and frowned as though trying to formulate a sentence. At last he wiped beer from his bristly lips and said, "You wasn't aiming to stay in the adobe, was you?"

"No. It's pretty much gone to pieces. Easier to rig me up a little shack than try to make the adobe livable. Meanwhile, I've got a tent."

"That's all right, then, mebbe. But mind you don't go poking around that there adobe."

"I don't think I'm apt to. But why not? Want another beer?"

The old man shook his head reluctantly and slid from his stool to the ground. "No thanks. I don't rightly know as I—"

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Thanks all the same." He turned and shuffled to the door.

Tallant smiled. "But why should I stay clear of the adobe?" he called after him.

The old man mumbled.

"What?"

"They bite," said the old man, and went out shivering into the night.

The bartender was back at his post. "I'm glad he didn't take that beer you offered him," he said. "Along about this time in the evening I have to stop serving him. For once he had the sense to quit."

Tallant pushed his own empty bottle forward. "I hope I didn't frighten him away?"

"Frighten? Well, mister, I think maybe that's just what you did do. He didn't want beer that sort of came, like you might say, from the old Carker place. Some of the old-timers here, they're funny that way."

Tallant grinned. "Is it haunted?"

"Not what you'd call haunted, no. No ghosts there that I ever heard of." He wiped the counter with a cloth, and seemed to wipe the subject away with it.

The flight sergeant pushed his coke bottle away, hunted in his pocket for nickles, and went over to the pin-ball machine. The young man with the beard slid onto his vacant stool. "Hope old Jake didn't worry you," he said.

Tallant laughed. "I suppose every town has its deserted homestead with a grisly tradition. But this sounds a little different. No ghosts, and they bite. Do you know anything about it?"

"A little," the young man said seriously. "A little. Just enough to—"

Tallant was curious. "Have one on me and tell me about it."

The flight sergeant swore bitterly at the machine.

Beer gurgled through the beard. "You see," the young man began, "the desert's so big you can't be alone in it. Ever notice that? It's all empty and there's nothing in sight, but there's always something moving over there where you can't quite see it. It's something very dry and thin and brown, only when you look around it isn't there. Ever see it?"

"Optical fatigue—" Tallant began.

"Sure. I know. Every man to his own legend. There isn't a tribe of Indians hasn't got some way of accounting for it. You've heard of the Watchers? And the twentieth-century white man comes along, and it's optical fatigue. Only in the nineteenth century things weren't quite the same, and there were the Carkers."

"You've got a special localized legend?"

"Call it that. You glimpse things out of the corner of your mind, same like you glimpse lean, dry things out of the

corner of your eye. You incase 'em in solid circumstance and they're not so bad. That is known as the Growth of Legend. The Folk Mind in Action. You take the Carkers and the things you don't quite see and you put 'em together. And they bite."

Tallent wondered how long that beard had been absorbing beer. "And what were the Carkers?" he prompted politely.

"Ever hear of Sawney Bean? Scotland—reign of James the First or maybe the Sixth, though I think Roughead's wrong on that for once. Or let's be more modern—ever hear of the Benders? Kansas in the 1870s? No? Ever hear of Procrustes? Or Polyphemus? Or Fee-fi-fo-fum?

"There are ogres, you know. They're no legend. They're fact, they are. The inn where nine guests left for every ten that arrived, the mountain cabin that sheltered travelers from the snow, sheltered them all winter till the melting spring uncovered their bones, the lonely stretches of road that so many passengers traveled halfway—you'll find 'em everywhere. All over Europe and pretty much in this country too before communications became what they are. Profitable business. And it wasn't just the profit. The Benders made money, sure; but that wasn't why they killed all their victims as carefuly as a kosher butcher. Sawney Bean got so he didn't give a damn about the profit; he just needed to lay in more meat for the winter.

"And think of the chances you'd have at an oasis."

"So these Carkers of yours were, as you call them, ogres?"

"Carkers, ogres—maybe they were Benders. The Benders were never seen alive, you know, after the townspeople found those curiously butchered bodies. There's a rumor they got this far West. And the time checks pretty well. There wasn't any town here in the 80s. Just a couple of Indian families—last of a dying tribe living on at the oasis. They van-

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ished after the Carkers moved in. That's not so surprising. The white race is a sort of super-ogre, anyway. Nobody worried about them. But they used to worry about why so many travelers never got across this stretch of desert. The travelers used to stop over at the Carkers, you see, and somehow they often never got any farther. Their wagons'd be found maybe fifteen miles beyond in the desert. Sometimes they found the bones, too, parched and white. Gnawed-looking, they said sometimes."

"And nobody ever did anything about these Carkers?"

"Oh, sure. We didn't have King James the Sixth—only I still think it was the First—to ride up on a great white horse for a gesture, but twice there were Army detachments came here and wiped them all out."

"Twice? One wiping-out would do for most families." Tallant smiled at the beery confusion of the young man's speech.

"Uh-huh. That was no slip. They wiped out the Carkers twice because you see once didn't do any good. They wiped 'em out and still travelers vanished and still there were white gnawed bones. So they wiped 'em out again. After that they gave up, and people detoured the oasis. It made a longer, harder trip, but after all—"

Tallant laughed. "You mean these Carkers of yours were immortal?"

"I don't know about immortal. They somehow just didn't die very easy. Maybe, if they were the Benders—and I sort of like to think they were—they learned a little more about what they were doing out here on the desert. Maybe they put together what the Indians knew and what they knew, and it

worked. Maybe Whatever they made their sacrifices to, understood them better out here than in Kansas."

"And what's become of them—aside from seeing them out of the corner of the eye?"

"There's forty years between the last of the Carker history and this new settlement at the oasis. And people won't talk much about what they learned here in the first year or so. Only that they stay away from that old Carker adobe. They tell some stories— The priest says he was sitting in the confessional one hot Saturday afternoon and thought he heard a penitent come in. He waited a long time and finally lifted the gauze to see was anybody there. Something was there, and it bit. He's got three fingers on his right hand now, which looks funny as hell when he gives a benediction."

Tallant pushed their two bottles toward the bartender. "That yarn, my young friend, has earned another beer. How about it, bartender? Is he always cheerful like this, or is this just something he's improvised for my benefit?"

The bartender set out the fresh bottles with great solemnity. "Me, I wouldn't've told you all that myself; but then he's a stranger, too, and maybe don't feel the same way we do here. For him it's just a story."

"It's more comfortable that way," said the young man with the beard, and took a firm hold on his beer bottle.

"But as long as you've heard that much," said the bartender, "you might as well— It was last winter, when we had that cold spell. You heard funny stories that winter. Wolves coming into prospector's cabins just to warm up. Well, business wasn't so good. We don't have a license for hard liquor and the boys don't drink much beer when it's that cold. But they used to come in anyway because we've got that big oil burner.

"So one night there's a bunch of 'em in here—old Jake was here, that you was talking to, and his dog Jigger—and I think I hear somebody else come in. The door creaks a little. But I don't see nobody and the poker game's going and we're talking just like we're talking now, and all of a sudden I hear a kind of a noise like *crack!* over there in that corner behind the juke box near the burner.

"I go over to see what goes and it gets away before I can see it very good. But it was little and thin and it didn't have no clothes on. It must've been damned cold that winter."

"And what was the cracking noise?" Tallant asked dutifully.

"That? That was a bone. It must've strangled Jigger without any noise. He was a little dog. It ate most of the flesh, and if it hadn't cracked the bone for the marrow it could've finished. You can still see the spots over there. That blood never did come out."

There had been silence all through the story. Now suddenly all hell broke loose. The flight sergeant let out a splendid yell and began pointing excitedly at the pin-ball machine and yelling for his payoff. The construction worker dramatically deserted the poker game, knocking his chair over in the process, and announced lugubriously that these guys here had their own rules, see?

Any atmosphere of Carker-inspired horror was dissipated. Tallant whistled as he walked over to put a nickel in the juke box. He glanced casually at the floor. Yes, there was a stain, for what that was worth.

He smiled cheerfully and felt rather grateful to the Carkers. They were going to solve his blackmail problem very neatly.

Tallant dreamed of power that night. It was a common dream with him. He was a ruler of the new American Corporate State that should follow the war; and he said to this man "Come!" and he came, and to that man "Go!" and he

went, and to his servants "Do this!" and they did it.

Then the young man with the beard was standing before him, and the dirty trench coat was like the robes of an ancient prophet. And the young man said, "You see yourself riding high, don't you? Riding the crest of the wave—the Wave of the Future, you call it. But there's a deep, dark undertow that you don't see, and that's a part of the Past. And the Present and even your Future. There is evil in mankind that is blacker even than your evil, and infinitely more ancient."

And there was something in the shadows behind the young man, something little and lean and brown.

Tallant's dream did not disturb him the following morning. Nor did the thought of the approaching interview with Morgan. He fried his bacon and eggs and devoured them cheerfully. The wind had died down for a change, and the sun was warm enough so that he could strip to the waist while he cleared land for his shack. His machete glinted brilliantly as it swung through the air and struck at the roots of the sagebrush.

Morgan's full face was red and sweating when he arrived.

"It's cool over there in the shade of the adobe," Tallant suggested. "We'll be more comfortable."

And in the comfortable shade of the adobe he swung the machete once and clove Morgan's full red sweating face in two.

It was so simple. It took less effort than uprooting a clump of sage. And it was so safe. Morgan lived in a cabin way to hell-and-gone and was often away on prospecting trips. No one would notice his absence for months, if then. No one had any reason to connect him with Tallant. And no one in Oasis would hunt for him in the Carker-haunted adobe.

The body was heavy, and the blood dripped warm on Tallant's bare skin. With relief he dumped what had been Morgan on the floor of the adobe. There were no boards, no flooring. Just the earth. Hard, but not too hard to dig a grave in. And no one was likely to come poking around in this taboo territory to notice the grave. Let a year or so go by, and the grave and the bones it contained would simply be attributed to the Carkers.

The corner of Tallant's eye bothered him again. Deliberately he looked about the interior of the adobe.

The little furniture was crude and heavy, with no attempt to smooth down the strokes of the ax. It was held together with wooden pegs or half-rotted thongs. There were age-old cinders in the fireplace, and the dusty shards of a cooking jar among them.

And there was a deeply hollowed stone, covered with stains that might have been rust, if stone rusted. Behind it was a tiny figure, clumsily fashioned of clay and sticks. It was something like a man and something like a lizard, and something like the things that flit across the corner of the eye.

Curious now, Tallant peered about further. He penetrated to the corner that the one unglassed window lighted but dimly. And there he let out a little choking gasp. For a moment he was rigid with horror. Then he smiled and all but laughed aloud.

This explained everything. Some curious individual had seen this, and from his account burgeoned the whole legend. The Carkers had indeed learned something from the Indians, but that secret was the art of embalming.

It was a perfect mummy. Either the Indian art had shrunk bodies, or this was that of a ten-year-old boy. There was no flesh. Only skin and bone and taut dry stretches of tendon between. The eyelids were closed; the sockets looked hollow under them. The nose was sunken and almost lost. The scant lips were tightly curled back from the long and very white teeth, which stood forth all the more brilliantly against the deep-brown skin.

It was a curious little trove, this mummy. Tallant was already calculating the chances for raising a decent sum of money from an interested anthropologist—murder can produce such delightfully profitable chance by-products—when he noticed the infinitesimal rise and fall of the chest.

The Carker was not dead. It was sleeping.

Tallant did not dare stop to think beyond the instant. This was no time to pause to consider if such things were possible in a well-ordered world. It was no time to reflect on the disposal of the body of Morgan. It was a time to snatch up your machete and get out of there.

But in the doorway he halted. There coming across the desert, heading for the adobe, clearly seen this time in the center of the eye, was another—a female.

He made an involuntary gesture of indecision. The blade of the machete clanged ringingly against the adobe wall. He heard the dry shuffling of a roused sleeper behind him.

He turned fully now, the machete raised. Dispose of this nearer one first, then face the female. There was no room even for terror in this thoughts, only for action.

The lean brown shape darted at him avidly. He moved lightly away and stood poised for its second charge. It shot forward again. He took one step back, machete-arm raised, and fell headlong over the corpse of Morgan. Before he could rise, the thin thing was upon him. Its sharp teeth had met through the palm of his left hand.

The machete moved swiftly. The thin dry body fell headless to the floor. There was no blood.

The grip of the teeth did not relax. Pain coursed up Tallant's left arm—a sharper, more bitter pain than you would expect from the bite. Almost as though venom—

He dropped the machete, and his strong white hand plucked and twisted at the dry brown lips. The teeth stayed clenched, unrelaxing. He sat bracing his back against the wall and gripped the head between his knees. He pulled. His flesh ripped, and blood formed dusty clots on the dirt floor. But the bite was firm.

His world had become reduced now to that hand and that head. Nothing outside mattered. He must free himself. He raised his aching arm to his face, and with his own teeth he tore at that unrelenting grip. The dry flesh crumbled away in desert dust, but the teeth were locked fast. He tore his lip against their white keenness, and tasted in his mouth the sweetness of blood and something else.

He staggered to his feet again. He knew what he must do. Later he could use cautery, a tourniquet, see a doctor with a story about a Gila monster—their heads grip, too, don't they?—but he knew what he must do now.

He raised the machete and struck again.

His white hand lay on the brown floor, gripped by the white teeth in the brown face. He propped himself against the adobe wall, momentarily unable to move. His open wrist hung over the deeply hollowed stone. His blood and his strength and his life poured out before the little figure of sticks and clay.

The female stood in the doorway now, the sun bright on her thin brownness. She did not move. He knew that she was waiting for the hollow stone to fill.

THE END.

The Moving Finger Writes,

—And Having Writ—

With Nostradamus, to translate is to interpret. A true "literal" translation is impossible, just as slang can't be translated.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Ah, the October issue is very good, I see—good as last October's. Impressions:

Don't you think that green and yellow are becoming rather tiring for cover colors? Why can't the color schemes of *Astounding* and Unknown Worlds overlap? Good colors for *Astounding:* red, green, yellow, violet, black, gray again, orange, or even extension of the picture all over the page, and under the title. For Unknown: Light blue, blue-gray, red, orange, violet, and how's this combination: white lettering on a black background, with orange or gold outlining the Unknown Worlds and where there is white usually?

Editorial: It certainly is notorious that no one believes in ESP even when they have had it conclusively proven to them. We need something more than Rhine's cards, if you ask me. As to levitation, I am positive of it, having been both levitator and levitee. And what about the case of D. D. Home? It surprises me that Fort had nothing on it in his books. It's blamed queer, but it's fascinating. Glad you haven't sacked Cartier's picture for "—And Having Writ—" because it's one of his best drawings.

All right, who's Smith? You have the wackiest surprises: we want Finlay and Cartier and Bok and we get Smith. Oh, well, we can stand a lot more of him. Let him illustrate the novel. Kramer is *terrible.* He ruined my mental picture of Cynthia by that monstrous drawing on page 51, and ruined the last part of the story. I'll come to that later. (I like Smith's pretty girls.) You know, if you can't get Finlay, you might try a few of my illustrations, as they look a lot like his. O. K., so you don't want them; you'll get a sample soon, I promise you, anyhow. (Think that over about Bok: he's very good for fantasy, but NOT for stf.)

ESP in action! The novel I am writ-

ing is called "The Destiny of Arthur St. John"—instanter comes "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag." Do I have to change my title? Anyway, John Riverside, whoever he is—I'm not as suspicious as the fellow this issue who thinks the only person who writes for Campbell's mag. is Campbell—really writes a story like a pro, and somewhat like Cartmill, too. Cartmill is very good. Now that the novel taboo for new authors has been taken off, I feel much bolder. Yes, sir, I think I'll read the novel over again, covering up the illustrations, of course. Speaking of them, I have a few words about Kramer. Unfortunately, I can find nothing much the matter with the first one and the one on page 44, and they almost could be called art. You should have thrown the others out and just used those two and perhaps the one on page 30. This unexpected excellence is well offset by the remainder, of which page 51 is the prime example. Oh, dear! Those fingers are way out of proportion. Cynthia was not propped up like that, since her feet were supposed to be higher than her head, and besides that, she looks as ugly as a moron, and I think she was meant to be a blonde. The one on page 16 is little better. Hoag was certainly not as old and fat as that, and he doesn't look much like a jeweler; more like a carpenter. Cynthia is O. K. on page 30, but no one can twist their fingers into those horrible contortions. Did the man never learn to draw? In spite of these unnecessary handicaps, Riverside comes through with flying colors, and let's have more of him. (So help me, Hanna, if you let Kramer illustrate my story—) I'd rather have no pictures at all.

Kolliker I do not like, but Isip is a breath of spring. Orban proves he has more ability than I thought with his pics for Kuttner's story, but please have more of Smith. The double-page spreads are much appreciated. (The number on the book was not 44, but 12, Mr. Orban.) Orban is not good for *Astounding*, though. *GET WESSO!*

"The Lie" had a fine surprise ending. "Magician's Dinner" was delicious, albeit she started out rather haywire. The "Amen" is new stuff. "Compliments of the Author" is another good Kuttner surprise-he-got-killed-or-something-anyhow story. One might call it logical. Bok's science is kind of batty, but the idea is new, I guess. "Are You Run-down, Tired—" seems to serve no purpose other than to give Freud some more material, you know. That's all I've read so far, so we'll skip the rest.

Next time: A review of the December issue, which I always read on Halloween, if possible, and I hope it's a real spooky one. Also on this bill, a review of 1941 and 1942. It seems I forgot it last year, so I will throw them together. (Really only twelve issues, though.) Which reminds me, WHEN do you go monthly? This is unmitigated mental and moral torture, let me tell you. It lowers our morale, it does. Please? And get some decent illustrations. Please?

Forgot to throw my oar into the fine Nostradamus controversy. The collapsing prime minister is Chamberlain, of course. The difference between 1940 and 1942 or 1943—whenever King George is supposed to take a powder—would not be very apparent from a distance of four hundred years, and he probably condensed the political affairs of the war into a couple of lines. On the other hand, Chamberlain was not the "greatest leader," and that would seem to indicate Churchill. (It would be a great boon if someone would publish the original verses with LITERAL translations.—D. C. King, 3 Cragmor Village, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

That does seem to make prophecy difficult!

Dear John:

Please ask Mr. Boucher which one of the quatrains of Nostradamus is supposed to foretell the invention of gun-

powder. The first hand-guns were invented in 1313, gunpowder itself became known in Europe around 1250 A. D.; it seems that it would not have needed Nostradamus to prophesy that. —Willy Ley.

Maybe you'll like Cartmill's "Wheesht!" too—

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Cleve Cartmill's novelette in the February Unknown stood above the other tales in that issue by far, with the exception of Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd-Gray Mouser story.

To my mind these two authors are leading the parade in Unknown by virtue of some excellent writing, and the more you present by them the better. Cartmill in particular has turned out some exceptional stories since first appearing in the magazine, and as far as I'm concerned, is to Unknown what Anson MacDonald was to *Astounding Science-Fiction*.

Kuttner's lead "novel," "Wet Magic," did not appeal to me in the least. For one thing it was rather short; hardly longer than the novelettes, and the trite plot did not add to its enjoyment value. This type of story has been sadly overworked in the past and it takes some mighty fine writing to make such a stereotyped opus click. Novels on the order of Cartmill's "After Armageddon" come as a welcome relief.

"Guardian" was probably the best among the shorts, being well-handled despite the age-old idea used. Van Vogt next in order, though "The Witch" was disappointing after the gems he has had in preceding numbers.

With so many of the old standbys going into service, doubtless we'll be seeing quite a few new names cropping up before long. Among these names should be that of Ray Bradbury, who has been turning out some darned good fantasy-fiction these days.

Here's hoping that we'll see some more Unknown classics like "Darker Than You Think," "Sinister Barrier," and "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag," during 1943.—Phil Bronson, 1710 Arizona Avenue, Santa Monica, California.

We'll scare you yet!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

You never heard of me, so my opinion won't strike you as authoritative. But I know what I like, and I have liked your Unknown and the more recent Unknown Worlds for a long time.

This will probably be a long letter, but I have been framing these comments mentally for six years, and there are a lot of them. Now that I have overcome my natural inertia long enough to set down on paper just how good I think your book is, I hope you will read doggedly through to the end.

I was reared and educated in the kind of society that considered "pulps" as all of a class, and a very low class at that. It was unfortunate, for being a secretive and sensitive fellow, I read scientifiction, and then fantasy fiction, on the sly, and never saved the books. I'm sorry now.

But one possible advantage lies in my not having the back issues of Unknown. Out of the welter of millions of words of fantasy stories I have read, I remember only the ones whose impact on my imagination leave no doubt, after all these years, as to their superiority in this field.

Among them all, "None But Lucifer" remains in my mind as the most brilliant. The second—the title escapes me—was the story concerning a modern scientist who projected himself into the time of the vikings, lived and fought with them, and worked his own magic for a broomstick-flight across those frozen wastes. The third—no title again—concerned the adventures of the man who was responsible for the explosion which turned a thriving valley into the Mediterranean Sea. (Or do I wan-

der here into the scientifiction realm, and the endless speculations in fiction on the possibility of time-travel?) And the fourth, "Slaves of Sleep."

Aside from the all-too-human tendency to identify one's self with the hero of an epic tale, all of these masterful stories have a common denominator which is irresistible to my mind. All of them, especially "None But Lucifer," were set in a plausible, real-seeming vein which stimulates imagination. They lie on the border line between reality and the veiled but ever-present possibility of a supernatural existence, and that is the main charm of these stories for me.

Horror stories of witches, vampires, evil men, and the like, perpetrating their evil deeds on unsuspecting humans, are too much alike, and too plainly appealing to the emotions in us which carry droves of patrons to "horror-feature" motion-picture theaters. I always get a bigger thrill from my private speculations on the co-existence of a supernatural world than from being plain "scared." Does that make sense to you?

I'm afraid that I seem to be boosting and slamming your swell book in one and the same breath, but let me assure you that I keep reading it in the hope that another epic tale such as the four mentioned above will appear.

Though beyond the hope that this letter has the clarity to make you see the distinction I see between my favorite four and all the others, I still hope that some day we may meet and discuss the constantly intriguing thoughts that are stimulated by my reading.

I very seldom consult the "—And Having Writ—" department, but almost always read what I call the editorial, "Of Things Beyond." Your skillful linking up of present-day accepted realities with the special-field developments you seem to see—border-line treatment again—leaves me with only admiration.

Well, there! A part of the suddenly irrepressible speech I had to make is "off my chest."—Harry J. Yeidel, 5417 Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

YOUR MIND WAS AN OPEN BOOK

—to this master villain, who read men's minds and accumulated great wealth . . . at the cost of national security.

But this evil-doer who told you your most secret thoughts was to learn that Americans care more for their country than for money . . . and that Doc Savage was his Nemesis!

You'll thrill to THE MENTAL MONSTER, in the July issue of

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS DOC SAVAGE

Greenface

by James H. Schmitz

Greenface was a horrible little thing that should have been the result of too many emptied bottles. At first, that is. Later, Greenface was not little—

Illustrated by Kelliher

"What I don't like," the fat sport said firmly—his name was Freddie Something—"is snakes! That was a whopping, mean-looking snake that went across the path there, and I ain't going another step nearer the icehouse!"

Hogan Masters, boss and owner of Masters Fishing Camp on Thursday Lake, made no effort to conceal his indignation.

"What you don't like," he said, his voice a trifle thick, "is work! That li'le garter snake wasn't more than six inches long. What you want is for me to carry all the fish up there alone while you go off to the cabin and take it easy—"

Freddie was already on his way to the cabin. "I'm on vacation!" he bellowed back happily. "Gotta save my strength! Gotta 'cuperate!"

Hogan glared after him, opened his mouth and shut it again. Then he picked up the day's catch of bass and walleyes and swayed on toward the icehouse. Usually a sober young man, he'd been guiding a party of fishermen from one of his light-housekeeping cabins over the lake's trolling grounds since early morning. It was hot work in June weather and now, at three in the afternoon, Hogan was tanked to the gills with iced beer.

He dropped the fish between chunks of ice under the sawdust, covered them up and started back to what he called the lodge—an old, two-story log structure taken over from the previous owners and at present reserved for himself and a few campers too lazy even to do their own cooking.

When he came to the spot where the garter snake had given Freddie his excuse to quit, he saw it wriggling about spasmodically at the edge of a clump of weeds, as if something hidden in there had caught hold of it.

Hogan watched the tiny reptile's struggles for a moment, then squatted down carefully and spread the weeds apart. There was a sharp buzzing like the ghost of a rattler's challenge, and something slapped moistly across the back of his hand, leaving a stinging sensation as if he had reached into a cluster of nettles. At the same moment, the snake disappeared with a jerk under the plants.

The buzzing continued. It was hardly a real sound at all—more like a thin, quivering vibration inside his head and

decidedly unpleasant! Hogan shut his eyes tight and shook his head to drive it away. He opened his eyes again, and found himself looking at Greenface.

Nothing even faintly resembling Greenface had ever appeared before in any of Hogan's weed patches, but at the moment he wasn't greatly surprised. It hadn't, he decided at once, any real face. It was a shiny, dark-green lump, the size and shape of a goose egg, standing on end among the weeds; it was pulsing regularly like a human heart; and across it ran a network of thin, dark lines that seemed to form two tightly shut eyes and a closed, faintly smiling mouth.

Like a fat little smiling idol in green jade—Greenface it became for Hogan then and there! With alcoholic detachment, he made a mental note of the cluster of fuzzy strands like hair roots about and below the thing. Then—somewhere underneath and blurred as though seen through milky glass—he discovered the snake, coiled up in a spiral and still turning with labored, writhing motions as if trying to swim in a mass of gelatin.

Hogan put his hand out to investigate this phenomenon, and one of the rootlets lifted as if to ward off his touch. He hesitated, and it flicked down, withdrawing immediately and leaving another red line of nettle-burn across the back of his hand.

In a moment Hogan was on his feet, several yards away. A belated sense of horrified outrage overcame him—he scooped up a handful of stones and hurled them wildly at the impossible little monstrosity. One thumped down near it; and with that, the buzzing sensation in his brain stopped.

Greenface began to slide slowly away through the weeds, all its rootlets wriggling about it, with an air of moving sideways and watching Hogan over a nonexistent shoulder. He found a chunk of wood in his hand and leaped in pursuit—and it promptly vanished.

Hogan spent another minute or two poking around in the vegetation with his club raised, ready to finish it off wherever he found it lurking. Instead, he discovered the snake among the weeds and picked it up.

It was still moving, though quite dead; the scales peeling away from the wrinkled flabby body. Hogan stared at it, wondering. He held it by the head, and the pressure of his finger and thumb, the skull within gave softly, like leather. It became suddenly horrible to feel—and then the complete inexplicability of the grotesque affair broke in on him.

Hogan flung the dead snake away with a wide sweep of his arm. He went back of the icehouse and was briefly, but thoroughly, sick.

Julia Allison leaned on her elbows over the kitchen table, studying a mail-order catalogue, when Hogan walked unsteadily into the lodge. Julia had dark-brown hair, calm gray eyes, and a wicked figure. She and Hogan had been engaged for half a year; Hogan didn't want to get married until he was sure he could make a success out of Masters Fishing Camp, which was still in its first season.

Julia glanced up smiling. The smile became a stare. She closed the catalogue.

"Hogan!" she stated, in the exact tone of her pa, Whitey Allison, refusing a last one to a customer in Whitey's liquor store in town, "you're plain drunk! Don't shake your head—it'll slop out your ears!"

"Julia—" Hogan began excitedly.

She stepped up to him and sniffed, wrinkling her nose. "*Pfaah!* Beer! Yes, darling?"

"Julia, I just saw something—a sort of crazy little green spook—"

Julia blinked twice.

"Look, infant," she said soothingly, "that's how people get talked about! Sit down and relax while I make up coffee, black. There's a couple came in this morning, and I stuck them in the end cabin. They want the stove tanked with kerosene, ice in the icebox, and

wood for a barbecue—I fixed them up with linen."

"Julia," Hogan inquired hoarsely, "are you going to listen to me or not?"

Her smile vanished. "Now you're yelling!"

"I'm *not* yelling. And I don't need coffee. I'm trying to tell you—"

"Then do it without shouting!" Julia replaced the cover on the coffee can with a whack that showed her true state of mind, and gave Hogan an abused look which left him speechless.

"If you want to stand there and sulk," she continued immediately, "I might as well run along—I got to help pa in the store tonight." That meant he wasn't to call her up.

She was gone before Hogan, struggling with a sudden desire to shake his Julia up and down for some time, like a cocktail, could come to a decision. So he went instead to see to the couple in the end cabin. Afterward he lay down bitterly and slept it off.

When he woke up, Greenface seemed no more than a vague and very uncertain memory, an unaccountable scrap of afternoon nightmare—due to the heat, no doubt! *Not* to the beer: on that point Hogan and Julia remained in disagreement, however completely they became reconciled otherwise. Since neither was willing to bring the subject up again, it didn't really matter.

The next time Greenface was seen, it wasn't Hogan who saw it.

In mid-season, on the twenty-fifth of June, the success of Masters Fishing Camp looked pretty well assured. Whitey Allison was hinting he'd be willing to advance money to have the old lodge rebuilt, as a wedding present. When Hogan came into camp for lunch everything was nice and peaceful, but before he got to the lodge steps, a series of piercing feminine shrieks from the direction of the north end cabin swung him around, running.

Charging up to the cabin with a number of startled camp guests strung out behind him, Hogan heard a babble of excited talk shushed suddenly and emphatically within. The man who was vacationing there with his wife appeared at the door.

"Old lady thinks she's seen a ghost, or something!" he apologized with an embarrassed laugh. "Nothing you can do. I . . . I'll quiet her down, I guess—"

Waving the others away, Hogan ducked around behind the cabin and listened shamelessly. Suddenly the babbling began again. He could hear every word of it.

"I did so see it! It was sort of blue and green and wet—and it had a green face and it s-s-smiled at me! It fl-floated up a tree and disappeared! Oh—G-G-Georgie!"

Georgie continued to make soothing sounds. But before nightfall, he came into the lodge to pay his bill.

"Sorry, old man," he said—he still seemed more embarrassed than upset—"I can't imagine what the little woman saw but she's got her mind made up, and we gotta go home. You know how it is. I sure hate to leave, myself!"

Hogan saw them off with a sickly smile. Uppermost among his own feelings was a sort of numbed, horrified vindication. A ghost that was blue and green and wet and floated up trees and disappeared, was a far from exact description of the little monstrosity he'd persuaded himself he *hadn't* seen—but still too near it to be a coincidence. Julia, driving out from town to see him next day, didn't think it was a coincidence, either.

"You couldn't possibly have told that hysterical old goose about the funny little green thing you thought you saw? She got confidential in the liquor store last night, and her hubby couldn't hush her. Everybody was listening. That sort of stuff won't do the camp any good, Hogan!"

Hogan looked helpless. If he told her about the camp haunt, she wouldn't be-

lieve him anyhow. And if she did, it would scare her silly.

"Well?" she urged suspiciously.

Hogan sighed. "Never spoke more than a dozen words with the woman—"

Julia seemed miffed but puzzled. There was a peculiar oily hothouse smell in the air when Hogan walked up to the road with her and watched her start back to town in her ancient car, but with a nearly sleepless night behind him, he wasn't as alert as he might have been. He was recrossing the long, narrow meadow between the road and the camp before the extraordinary quality of that odor struck him. And then, for the second time, he found himself looking at Greenface—at a bigger Greenface and not a better one.

About sixty feet away, up in the birches on the other side of the meadow, it was almost completely concealed: an indefinable oval of darker vegetable green in the thick foliage. Its markings were obscured by the leaf shadows among which it lay motionless except for that sluggish pulsing.

Hogan stared at it for long seconds while his scalp crawled and his heart hammered a thudding alarm into every fiber of his body. What scared him was its size—that oval was as big as a football; it had been growing at a crazy rate since he saw it last!

Swallowing hard, he mopped off the sweat that was starting out on his forehead while he walked on stiffly toward the lodge. Whatever it was, he didn't want to scare it off! He had an automatic shotgun slung above the kitchen door, for emergencies; and a dose of No. 2 shot would turn this particular emergency into a museum specimen—

Around the corner of the lodge, he went up the entrance steps four at a time. A few seconds later, with the gun in his hands and reaching for a handful of shells, he shook his head to drive a queer soundless buzzing out of his ears. Instantly, he remembered when he'd experienced that sensation before and wheeled toward the screened kitchen window.

The big birch trembled slightly as if horrified to see a huge spider with jade-green body and blurred cluster of threadlike legs flow down along its

trunk. Twelve feet from the ground, it let go of the tree and dropped with the long bunched threads stretched straight down before it. Hogan grunted and blinked.

It happened before his eyes: at the instant the bunched tips hit the ground, Greenface was jarred into what could only be called a higher stage of visibility. There was no change in the head, but the legs abruptly became flat, faintly greenish ribbons, flexible and semitransparent. Each about six inches wide and perhaps six feet long, they seemed attached in a thick fringe all around the lower part of the head, like a Hawaiian dancer's grass skirt. They showed a bluish gloss wherever the sun struck them, but Greenface didn't wait for a closer inspection.

Off it went, swaying and gliding swiftly on the ends of these foot ribbons into the woods beyond the meadow. For all the world, it *did* look like a conventional ghost, the ribbons glistening in a luxurious winding sheet around the area where a body should have been, but wasn't! No wonder that poor woman—

He found himself giggling helplessly. Forcing himself to stop, he laid the gun upon the kitchen table. Then he tried to control the shaking of his hands long enough to get a cigarette going.

Long before the middle of July, every last tourist had left Masters Fishing Camp in a more or less perturbed condition. Vaguely, Hogan sensed it was unfortunate that two of his attempts to dispose of Greenface had been observed while his quarry remained unseen. It wasn't, of course, his fault if the creature chose to exercise an uncanny ability to become almost completely invisible at will—nothing more than a tall, glassy blur which flickered off through the woods and was gone. And it wasn't until he drove into town one evening that he realized just how unfortunate that little trick was, nevertheless, for him.

Whitey Allison's greeting seemed brief and chilly, while Julia delayed putting in an appearance for almost half an hour. Hogan waited patiently enough.

"You might pour me a Scotch," he suggested at last.

Whitey passed him a significant look.

"Better lay off the stuff," he advised heavily. Hogan flushed red.

"What you mean by that?"

"There's plenty of funny stories going around about you right now!" Whitey told him, blinking belligerently. Then he looked past Hogan, and Hogan knew Julia had come into the store behind him; but he was too angry to drop the matter there.

"What do you expect me to do about them?" he demanded.

"That's no way to talk to pa!"

Julia's voice was sharper than Hogan had ever heard it—he swallowed hard and tramped out of the liquor store without looking at her. Down the street he had a couple of drinks; and coming past the store again on the way to his car, he saw Julia behind the counter laughing and chatting with a group of summer residents. She seemed to be having a grand time; her gray eyes sparkled and there was a fine high color in her cheeks.

Hogan snarled out the worst word he knew and went on home. It was true he'd grown accustomed to an impressive dose of whiskey at night, to put him to sleep. At night, Greenface wasn't abroad and there was no sense in lying awake to wonder and worry about it. On warm, clear days around noon was the time to be on the alert; twice Hogan caught it basking in the treetops in full sunlight and each time took a long shot at it, which had no effect beyond scaring it into complete visibility. It dropped out of the tree like a rotten fruit and scudded off into the bushes, its foot ribbons weaving and flapping all about it.

Well, it all added up. Was it surprising if he seemed constantly on the watch for something nobody else could see? When the camp cabins grew empty one by one and stayed empty,

Hogan told himself that he preferred it that way. Now he could devote all his time to tracking down that smiling haunt and finishing it off! Afterward would have to be early enough to repair the damage it had done his good name and bank balance.

He tried to keep Julia out of these calculations. Julia hadn't been out to the camp for weeks; and under the circumstances he didn't see how he could do anything now to patch up their misunderstanding.

After being shot at the second time, Greenface remained out of sight for so many days that Hogan almost gave up hunting for it. He tramped morosely down into the lodge cellar one afternoon and pulled a banana from a cluster he'd got from the wholesale grocer in town. Wedged in under the fruit he found the tiny mummified body of a hummingbird, some tropical species with a long curved beak and long ornamental tail feathers.

Except for beak and feathers, it would have been unrecognizable: bones, flesh and skin were shriveled together into a small lump of doubtful consistency, like dried gum. Hogan, reminded of the dead snake from which he had driven Greenface near the icehouse, handled it with fingers that shook a little. In part, at least; the hummingbird seemed to explain the origin of the camp spook.

Greenface was, of course, carnivorous, in some weird, out-of-the-ordinary fashion. The snake had been an indication, and since then birds of every type were growing shy around the camp, while red squirrels and chipmunks disappeared without trace. When that banana cluster was shipped from Brazil or some island in the Caribbean, Greenface—a seedling Greenface, very much smaller even than when Hogan first saw it—had come along with it, clinging to its hummingbird prey!

But during the transition, something—perhaps merely the touch of the colder North—must have removed some internal check on its growth which still seemed to be progressing in a jerky and unpredictable fashion. For though it appeared to lack any solid parts that might resist decomposition after death, creatures of such size and conforming to no recognizable pattern of either the vegetable or the animal kingdoms, couldn't very well be in existence anywhere without finally attracting human attention. Whereas, if they grew normally to be only a foot or two high in those luxuriant tropical places, they seemed intelligent and alert enough to escape observation—even discounting that inexplicable knack of turning transparent from one second to the next!

His problem, meanwhile, was a purely practical one; and the next time he grew aware of the elusive hothouse smell near the lodge, he had a plan ready laid. His nearest neighbor, Pete Jeffries, who provided Hogan with most of his provisions from a farm two miles down the road to town, owned a hound by the name of Old Battler—a large, surly brute with a strain of Airedale in its make-up, and reputedly the best trailing nose in the county.

Hogan's excuse for borrowing Old Battler was a fat buck who'd made his headquarters in the marshy ground across the bay. Pete had no objection to that sort of business. He whistled the hound in and handed him over to Hogan with a parting admonition to "keep an eye peeled for them damn game wardens!" Pete and Old Battler were the slickest pair of poachers for a hundred miles around.

The oily fragrance under the birches was so distinct that Hogan could almost have followed it himself. Unfortunately, it didn't mean a thing to the dog. Panting and growling as Hogan, cradling the shotgun, brought him up on a leash, Old Battler was ready for any type of quarry from rabbits to a pig-stealing bear; but he simply wouldn't or couldn't understand that he was to track

down that bloodless vegetable odor to its source!

He walked off a few yards in the direction the thing had gone, nosing the grass; then, ignoring Hogan's commands, he returned to the birch, smelled carefully around its base and paused to demonstrate in unmistakable fashion

what he thought of the scent. Finally he sat on his haunches and regarded Hogan with a baleful, puzzled eye.

There was nothing to do but take him back and tell Pete Jeffries the poaching excursion was off because the warden had put in an appearance. When Hogan got back to the lodge, he heard the telephone jingling above the cellar stairs and started for it with an eagerness that surprised himself.

"Hello!" he shouted into the mouthpiece. "Hello? Julia? That you?"

There was no answer from the other end. Hogan, listening, heard voices, several of them: people were laughing and talking. Then a door slammed faintly and someone called out: "Hi, Whitey! How's the old man?" She had called up from the liquor store all right, perhaps just to see what he was doing. He thought he could even hear the faint flutter of her breath.

"Julia," Hogan said softly, scared by the silence, "What's the matter, darling? Why don't you say something?"

Now he did hear her take a quick, deep breath. Then the receiver clicked down, and the line went dead.

The rest of the afternoon, he managed to keep busy cleaning out the cabins that had been occupied. Counting back to the day the last of them was vacated, he decided the reason nobody had arrived since was that a hostile Whitey Allison, in his strategic position at the town bus stop, was directing all tourist traffic to other camps. Not—Hogan assured himself again—that he wanted anyone around until he had solved his problem; it would only make matters worse.

But why had Julia called up? What did it mean?

That night the moon was full. Near ten o'clock, with no more work to do, Hogan settled down wearily on the lodge steps. Presently he lit a cigarette. His

intention was to think matters out to some conclusion in the quiet night air, but all he seemed able to do was to tell himself uselessly, over and over again, that there *must* be some way of trapping that elusive green horror!

He pulled the sides of his face down slowly with his fingertips. "I gotta *do* something!"—the futile whisper seemed to have been running through his head all day: "Gotta *do* something! Gotta—" He'd be having a nervous collapse if he didn't watch out!

The rumbling barks of Jeffries' Old Battler began to churn up the night to the eastward—and suddenly Hogan caught the characteristic tinny stutter of Julia's little car as it turned down the road beyond the Jeffries farm and came rattling on in the direction of the camp.

The thrill that swung him to his feet was quenched at once by fresh doubts. Even if Julia was coming to tell him she'd forgiven him, he'd be expected to explain what was making him act like this. And he couldn't explain it! If she actually believed him, it might affect her mind. If she didn't, she'd think he was crazy or lying—he couldn't do it, Hogan decided despairingly. He'd have to send her away again!

He took the big flashlight down from its hook beside the door and started off forlornly to meet her when she would bring the car bumping along the path from the road. Then he realized that the car, past Jeffries' place but still a half mile or so away, had stopped.

He waited, puzzled. From a distance he heard the creaky shift of gears, a brief puttering of the motor—another shift and putter. Then silence. Old Battler was also quiet, probably listening suspiciously; though he, too, knew the sound of Julia's car. There was no one else to hear it; Jeffries had gone to the city with his wife that afternoon, and they wouldn't be back till late next morning.

Hogan frowned, flashing the light off and on against the moonlit side of the lodge. In the quiet, three or four whippoorwills were crying to each other with insane rapidity up and down the lake front. There was a subdued shrilling of crickets everywhere, and occasionally the threefold soft call of an owl dropped across the bay. He started reluctantly up the path toward the road.

The headlights were out, or he would have been able to see them from here. But the full moon sailed high, and the road was a narrow silver ribbon running straight down through the pines toward Jeffries' farmhouse.

Quite suddenly he discovered the car, drawn up beside the road and turned back toward town. It was Julia's car all right; and it was empty. Hogan walked slowly toward it, peering right and left, then jerked around with a start to a sudden crashing noise among the pines a hundred yards or so down off the road—a scrambling animal rush that seemed to be moving toward the lake. An instant later, Old Battler's angry roar told him the hound was running loose and had prowled into something it disapproved of down there.

He was still listening, trying to analyze the commotion, when a girl in a dark sweater and skirt stepped out quietly from the shadow of the roadside pines beyond him. Hogan didn't see her; he heard her cross the ditch to the road in a beautiful reaching leap. When he looked around, she was running like a rabbit for the car.

He yelped breathlessly: "Julia!"

For just an instant, Julia looked back at him, her face a pale, scared blur in the moonlight. Then the car door slammed shut behind her, and with a shiver and groan the old machine lurched into action. Hogan made no further attempt to stop her. Confused and unhappy, he watched the headlights sweep down the road until they swung out of sight around the corner behind Jeffries' farm.

"Now what the devil was *she* poking around here for?"

He sighed, shook his head and started back to the camp. There was a cool draft of air flowing up from the lake across the road, but Old Battler's vicious snarls were no longer audible on it. Hogan sniffed idly at the breeze, wondered at a faint, peculiar odor that tainted it, and sniffed again. Then, in a flash of apprehensive rage, he realized what had happened. Greenface was down in the pines somewhere—the hound had stirred it up, discovered it was alive and worth worrying, but lost it again and was now casting about silently to find its hiding place!

Hogan crossed the ditch in a jump that bettered Julia's, blundered into the wood and ducked just in time to avoid being speared in the eye by a jagged branch of asp. More cautiously he worked his way in among the trees, went sliding down a moldy incline, swore in exasperation as he tripped over a rotten trunk and was reminded thereby of the flashlight in his hand. He walked slowly across a moonlit clearing, listening, then found himself confronted by a dense cluster of evergreens and switched on the light.

It stabbed into a dark-green oval, bigger than a man's head, eight feet away.

He stared fascinated at the thing, expecting it to vanish. But Greenface made no move beyond a slow writhing among the velvety foot ribbons that supported it. It seemed to have grown again in its jack-in-the-box fashion; it was taller than Hogan and stooping slightly toward him. The lines on its pulsing head formed two tightly shut eyes and a wide, thin-lipped, insanely smiling mouth.

Gradually it was borne in upon Hogan that the thing was asleep! Or had been asleep—for in that moment, he became aware of a change in the situation through something like the buzzing escape of steam, a sound just too high to be audible, that throbbed through his head. Then he noticed that Greenface, swaying slowly, quietly, had come a foot or two closer, and he saw the tips of the foot ribbons grow dim and transparent as they slid over the moss toward him. A sudden horror of this stealthy approach seized him, draining the strength out of his body. Without thinking of what he did he switched off the light.

Almost instantly the buzzing sensation died away, and before Hogan had backed off to the edge of the moonlit clearing, he realized that Greenface had stopped its advance. Suddenly he understood.

Unsteadily he threw the beam on again and directed it full on the smiling face. For a moment there was no result; then the faint buzzing began once more in his brain, and the foot ribbons writhed and dimmed as Greenface came sliding forward. He snapped it off, and the thing grew still, solidifying.

Hogan began to laugh in silent hysteria. He had caught it now! Light brought Greenface alive, let it act, move—enabled it to pull its unearthly vanishing stunt. At high noon it was as vital as a cat or hawk. Lack of light made it still, pulled, though perhaps able to react automatically.

Greenface was trapped!

He began to play with it, savagely enjoying his power over the horror, switching the light off and on. Presently, Greenface would die; but first—he seemed to sense a growing dim anger in that soundless buzzing—and suddenly the thing did not stop!

In a flash, Hogan realized he had permitted it to reach the edge of the little moonlit clearing, and under the full glare of the moon, Greenface was still advancing upon him, though slowly. Its outlines grew altogether blurred—even the head started to fade.

Hogan leaped back, with a new rush of the helpless horror with which he had first sensed it coming toward him. But he retreated only into the shadows on the other side of the clearing.

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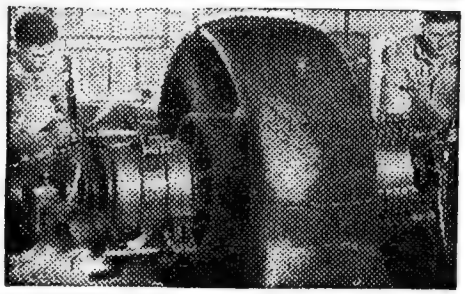

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The ghostly outline of Greenface came rolling on, its nebulous leering head swaying slowly from side to side like the head of a hanged and half-rotted thing. It reached the fringe of shadows and stopped, while the foot ribbons darkened as they touched the darkness and writhed back. Dimly it seemed to be debating this new situation.

Hogan swallowed hard. He had noticed a blurred, shapeless something which churned about slowly within the jellylike shroud beneath the head; and he had a sudden conviction that he knew the reason for Old Battler's silence. Greenface had become as dangerous as a tiger!

Meanwhile, he had no intention of leaving it in the moonlight's liberty. He threw the beam on the dim oval mask again, and slowly, stupidly, moving along that rope of light, Greenface entered the darkness; and the light flicked out, and it was trapped once more.

Trembling and breathless after his half-mile run, Hogan reached the lodge and began stuffing his pockets with as many shells as they would take. Then he picked up the shotgun and started back toward the spot where he had left the thing, forcing himself not to hurry. If he didn't blunder now, his troubles would be over. But if he did—Hogan shivered. He hadn't quite realized before that a time was bound to come when Greenface would be big enough to lose its fear of him.

Pushing down through the ditch and into the woods, he flashed the light ahead of him. In a few more minutes he reached the place where he had left Greenface. And it was not there!

Hogan glared about, wondering wildly whether he had missed the right spot and knowing he hadn't. He looked up and saw the tops of the jack pines swaying against the pale blur of the sky; and as he stared at them, a ray of moonlight flickered through that broken canopy and touched him and was gone again, and then he understood. Greenface had crept up along such intermittent threads of light into the trees.

One of the pine tops appeared blurred and top-heavy. Hogan watched it a few minutes; then he depressed the safety button on the automatic, cradled the gun, and put the flashlight beam dead-center on that blur. In a moment he felt the fine mental irritation as the blur began to flow downward through the tree toward him. Remembering that Greenface did not mind a long drop to the ground, he switched off the light and watched it take shape among the shadows, and then begin a slow retreat toward the treetops and the moon.

Hogan took a deep breath and raised the gun.

The five reports came one on top of the other in a rolling roar, while the pine top jerked and splintered and flew. Greenface was plainly visible now, still clinging, twisting and lashing in spasms like a broken snake. Big branches, torn loose in those furious convulsions, crashed ponderously down toward Hogan. He backed off hurriedly, flicked in five new shells and raised the gun again.

And again!

And again!

The whole top of the tree seemed to be coming down with it! Dropping the gun, Hogan covered his head with his arms and shut his eyes. He heard the sodden, splashy thump with which it landed on the forest mold a half dozen yards away. Then something hard and solid slammed down across his shoulders and the back of his skull.

There was a brief sensation of plunging headlong through a fire-streaked darkness. For many hours thereafter, no sort of sensation reached Hogan's mind at all.

"Haven't seen you around in a long time," bellowed Pete Jeffries across the fifty feet of water between his boat and Hogan's. The farmer pulled a fat flapping whitefish out of the illegal gill net he was emptying and plunked it down on

the pile before him. "What you do with yourself—sleep up in the woods?"

"Times I do," Hogan admitted.

"Used to myself when I was your age. Out with a gun alla time," Pete said mournfully. "It ain't no real fun any more—'specially since them game wardens got Old Battler."

Hogan shivered imperceptibly, remembering the ghastly thing he'd buried that July morning, six weeks back, when he awoke, thinking his skull was caved in and found Greenface somehow had dragged itself away, with enough shot in it to lay out a township. At least it felt sick enough to disgorge what was left of Old Battler, and to refrain from harming Hogan. Maybe he'd killed it, at that—though he couldn't quite believe it.

"Think the storm will hit before evening?" he asked out of his thoughts, not caring much either way. Pete glanced at the sky.

"Yes!" he agreed matter-of-factly. "Hit the lake in half an hour maybe. I know two guys," he added, "who are going to get awful wet. Not meaning us—"

"That so?"

"Yeah. Know that little bay back where the Indian outfit used to live? There's two of the drunkest buggers I seen on Thursday Lake this summer—fishing there off from a little duck boat! They come across the lake somewheres."

"Think we ought to warn 'em?"

"Not me!" said Jeffries. "They made some kinda crack when I passed there. I like to have rammed 'em." He looked at Hogan with puzzled benevolence. "Seems there was something I was

gonna tell you . . . well, guess it was a lie!" He sighed. "How's the walleyes hitting?"

"Pretty good." Hogan had picked up a stringerful trolling along the lake bars.

"I got it now!" Pete spluttered excitedly. "Whitey told me last night: Julia's got herself engaged up with a guy in the city—place she's working at! They're going to get married real quick."

Hogan bent over the side of his boat and began to unknot the fish-stringer. He hadn't seen Julia since the night he last met Greenface. A week or so later he heard she'd left town and taken a job in the city.

"Seemed to me I oughta tell you," Pete continued with remorseless neighborliness. "Didn't you and she used to to go around some?"

"Yeah, some," Hogan agreed desperately. He held up the walleyes. "Want to take these home for the missis, Pete? I was just fishing for the fun of it."

"Sure will!" Pete was delighted. "If you don't want 'em. Nothing beats walleyes for eatin', 'less it's whitefish. But I'm going to smoke these. Say, how about me bringing you a ham of buck, smoked, for the walleyes?"

"O. K.," Hogan smiled.

"Have to be next week," Pete admitted regretfully. "I went shooting the north side of the lake three nights back, and there wasn't a deer around. Something's scared 'em all out over there."

"O. K.," Hogan said again, not listening at all. He got the motor going and cut away from Pete with a wave of his hand. "Be seeing you, Pete!"

Two miles down the lake he got his mind off Julia long enough to find a possible unpleasant significance in Pete's last words.

He cut the motor to idling speed and then shut it off entirely, trying to get his thoughts into some kind of order. Since that chunk of pine rapped him over the head and robbed him of his chance of finishing off Greenface, he'd seen no more of the thing and heard nothing to justify his suspicion that it was still alive somewhere, maybe still growing. But from Thursday Lake northward to the border of Canada stretched two hundred miles of bush, tree and water, with only the barest scattering of towns and tiny farms. Hogan often pictured Greenface prowling about back there, safe from human detection and a ghastly new enemy for the harried small life of the bush, while it nourished its hatred for the man who had so nearly killed it.

It wasn't a pretty picture. It made him take the signs indicating MASTERS FISHING CAMP from the roads, and made him turn away the occasional would-be guest who still found his way to the camp in spite of Whitey Allison's unrelenting vigilance in town. It also made it impossible for him even to try to get in touch with Julia and explain what couldn't have been explained anyhow.

A rumble of thunder broke through Hogan's thoughts. The sky in the east hung black with clouds; and the boat was beating in steadily toward shore with the wind and waves behind it. Hogan started the motor and came around in a curve to take a direct line toward camp. As he did so, a white object rose sluggishly on the waves not a hundred yards ahead of him and sank again. With a start of dismay he realized it was the upturned bottom of a small flat boat, and remembered the two fishermen he'd intended warning against the approach of the storm.

The little bay Jeffries had mentioned, lay a half-mile in back of him; he'd come past it without being aware of the fact. There was no immediate reason to think the drunks had met with an accident; more likely they'd simply landed and neglected to draw the boat high enough out of the water, so that it drifted off into the lake on the first puff of wind.

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EVERY CIVILIAN A FIGHTER

Circling the derelict to make sure it was really empty, Hogan turned back to pick up the two sportsmen and take them to his camp until the storm was over.

On reaching the comparatively smooth water of the tree-ringed bay, Hogan throttled the motor and came in slowly because the bay was shallow and choked with pickerel grass and reeds. There was little breeze here; the air seemed even oppressively hot and still after the free race of wind on the outer lake. It was also darkening rapidly.

He stood up in the boat and stared along the shoreline over the tops of the reeds, wondering where the two had gone—and whether they mightn't have been in the boat anyway when it overturned.

"Hey, there!" he yelled uncertainly.

His voice echoed back out of the creaking shore pines. From somewhere near the end of the bay sounded a series of loud splashes—probably a big fish flopping about in the reeds. When that stopped, the stillness became almost tangible; and Hogan drew a quick, deep breath as if he found breathing difficult.

Again the splashing in the shallows, much closer now. Hogan faced the sound frowning; his frown became a puzzled stare. That was certainly no fish but some big animal, a deer, a bear, possibly a moose—the odd thing was that it should be coming toward him. Craning his neck, he saw the reed tops bend and shake about a hundred yards away, as if a slow, heavy wave of air were passing through them in his direction. There was nothing else to be seen.

Then the truth flashed on him—a rush of horrified comprehension.

Hogan tumbled back into the stern and threw the motor on full power. As the boat drove forward, he swung it around to avoid an impenetrable wall of reeds ahead, and straightened out toward the mouth of the bay. Over the roar of the motor and the splash and hissing of water, he was aware of one other sensation: that shrilling vibration of the nerves, too high to be a sound, that had haunted his dreams all summer! How near the thing came to catching him as he raced the boat through the weedy traps of the bay, he never knew; but once past the first broad patch of open water he risked darting a glance back over his shoulder—

And then, through a daze of incredulous shock, Hogan heard himself scream—raw, hoarse yells of sheer animal terror.

He wasn't in any immediate danger for Greenface had given up the pursuit. It stood, fully visible among the reeds, a hundred yards or so back. The smiling, jade-green face was turned toward Hogan, lit up by strange reflections from the stormy sky and mottled with red streaks and patches he didn't remember having seen there before. The glistening, flowing mass beneath it writhed like a cloak of translucent pythons. It towered in the bay, dwarfing even the trees behind it in its unearthly menace. It *had* grown again! It was all of thirty feet high.

The storm, breaking before Hogan reached camp, raged on through the night and throughout the next day. Since he would never be able to find the thing in that torrential downpour, he didn't have to decide whether he must try to hunt Greenface down or not. In any case, he wouldn't have to go looking for it, Hogan told himself, staring out of the lodge windows at the tormented chaos of water and wind without—it had come back for him, and presently it would find its way to the familiar neighborhood of the camp!

There was a certain justice in that. He'd been the nemesis of the monster as much as it had been his. It was simply time to bring the matter to an end before anyone else got killed.

Someone had told him—now he thought of it, it must have been Pete Jeffries, plodding up faithfully through the endless storm one morning with supplies for Hogan—that the two lost

sportsmen were considered drowned; their boat had been discovered, and as soon as the weather made it possible, the lake would be searched for their bodies. Hogan nodded, saying nothing and keeping his face expressionless. Pete was looking at him in a worried way.

"You shouldn't drink so much, Hogan!" Pete blurted out suddenly. "It ain't doing you no good. The missis was telling me you was really keen on that Julia—maybe I shoulda kept my trap shut. But you'd have found out anyhow."

"Sure I would," Hogan said quickly. It hadn't dawned on him before that Pete believed he'd shut himself up here to mourn for Julia.

"Me," Pete told him confidentially, "I didn't marry the girl I was after, neither. But don't you never tell that to the missis, Hogan! Well, anyhow, it got me just like it got you . . . you gotta snap outta it, see?"

Something was moving, off in the grass back of the machine shed. Hogan watched it from the corner of his eye till he made sure it was only a bush shaking itself in the sleety wind.

"Eh?" he said. "Oh, sure. I'll snap out of it, Pete. Don't you worry."

"That's right." Pete sounded hearty but not quite convinced. "Come around see us some evening, Hogan. It don't do a guy no good to be sittin' off here by himself alla time."

Hogan gave his promise. Maybe he was thinking of Julia a good deal; but mostly, it seemed to him, he was thinking of Greenface. As for drinking too much, he was certainly far too smart even to look at the whiskey. There was no telling when the crisis would come, and he intended to be ready for it. At night he slept well enough.

Meanwhile, the storm continued, day and night. Hogan couldn't quite remember finally how long it had been going on, but it was as bad a wet blow as he'd ever got stuck in. The lake water rolled over the dock with every wave, and the little dock down near the end cabins had been taken clean away. At least three trees were down within the confines of the camp, the ground littered with branches. There were times when Hogan got to wondering why Greenface didn't come—and whether he hadn't possibly made the whole thing up.

But then he would always remember that on cold wet days it didn't like to move about. It was hiding up, waiting for the storm to subside. It would be hard for so huge a thing to find shelter anywhere, of course; but after a little thinking, he knew exactly where it must be—at the cut-off above the lake, about three miles west of the camp and a mile or so from the bay where he had seen it last.

On the eighth morning the storm ebbed out. In mid-afternoon the wind veered around to the south; shortly before sunset the cloud banks began to dissolve while mists steamed from the lake surface. Hogan went out with a hand ax and brought in a few dead birches from a windfall over the hill to the south of the lodge. His firewood was running low; he felt chilled and heavy all through, unwilling to exert himself. He had left the gun in the lodge, and as he came downhill dragging the last of the birches, he was frightened into a sweat by a pale, featureless face that stared at him out of the evening sky between the trees. The moon had grown nearly full in the week it was hidden from sight; and Hogan remembered that Greenface was able to walk in the light of the full moon.

He cast an anxious look overhead. The clouds were melting toward the horizon in every direction; it threatened to be an exceptionally clear night. He stacked the birch logs beside the fireplace in the lodge's main room. Then he brewed up the last of his coffee and drank it black. A degree of alertness returned to him.

Afterward he went about, closing the shutters over every window except those facing the south meadow. The tall cot-

tonwoods on the other three sides of the house should afford a protective screen, but the meadow would be flooded with moonlight. He tried to remember at what time the moonset came—no matter, he'd watch till then and afterward sleep! The effect of the coffee was wearing off, and he had no more.

He pulled an armchair up to an open window from where, across the still, he controlled the whole expanse of open ground over which Greenface could approach. Since a rifle couldn't have much effect on a creature that lacked both vital parts and sufficient solidity to stop a bullet, he had the loaded shotgun across his knees. The flashlight and the contents of five more shell boxes lay on the small table beside him.

With the coming of night, all but the brightest of stars were dimmed in the gray gleaming sky. The moon itself stood out of Hogan's sight above the lodge roof, but he could look across the meadows as far as the machine shed and the icehouse.

He got up twice to replenish the fire which made a warm, heartening glow on his left side; and the second time he considered replacing the armchair with something less comfortable. He was becoming thoroughly drowsy. Occasionally a ripple of apprehension brought him bolt upright, pulse hammering; but the meadow always appeared quiet and unchanged, and the night alive only with familiar, heartening sounds: the crickets, a single whippoorwill, and the occasional dark wail of a loon from the outer lake.

Each time fear wore itself out again, and then, even thinking of Julia, it was hard to keep awake. But she remained in his mind tonight with almost physical clearness—sitting opposite him at the kitchen table, raking back her unruly hair while she leafed slowly through the mail-order catalogues; or diving off the float he'd anchored beyond the dock, a bathing cap tight around her head and the chin strap framing her beautiful, stubborn little face, like a picture.

Beautiful but terribly stubborn, Hogan thought, frowning drowsily. Like one evening, when they'd quarreled again and she hid among the empty cabins at the north end of the camp. She wouldn't answer when Hogan began looking for her, and by the time he discovered her, he was worried and angry. So he came walking slowly toward her through the half-dark, with-

out a word—and that was one time Julia did get a little scared of him. "Hogan!" she cried breathlessly. "Now wait! Listen, Hogan—"

He sat up with a jerky start, her voice still ringing in his mind.

The empty moonlit meadow lay like a vast silver carpet below him, infinitely peaceful; even the shrilling of the tireless crickets was withdrawn in the distance. He must have slept for some while, for the shadow of the house formed an inky black square on the ground immediately below the window. The moon was sinking.

Hogan sighed, shifted the gun on his knees, and immediately grew still again. There'd been something—and then he heard it clearly: a faint scratching on the outside of the bolted door behind him, and afterward a long breathless whimper like the gasp of a creature that has no strength to cry out.

Hogan moistened his lips and sat very quiet. In the next instant, the hair at the back of his neck rose hideously of its own accord.

"Hogan . . . Hogan . . . oh, please! . . . Hogan!"

The toneless cry might have come out of the shadowy room behind him, or over miles of space, but there was no mistaking that voice. Hogan tried to say something, and his lips wouldn't move. His hands lay cold and paralyzed on the shotgun.

"Hogan please! Listen . . . Hogan—"

He heard the chair go over with a dim crash behind him. He was moving toward the door in a blundering, dreamlike rush, and then struggling with numb fingers against the stubborn resistance of the bolt.

"That awful thing! That awful thing! Standing there in the meadow! I thought it was a . . . a TREE! I . . . I'm not CRAZY, am I, Hogan?"

The jerky, panicky whispering went

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on and on, until he stopped it with his mouth on hers and felt her relax in his arms. He'd bolted the door behind them before carrying her to the fireplace couch —Greenface must be standing somewhere around the edge of the cottonwood patch if she'd seen it coming across the meadow from the road. Her hand tightened on his shoulder, and he looked down. Julia's eyes were wide and dark, but incredibly she was smiling—well, he'd always known Julia was wonderful!

"I came back, Hogan. I had to find out—was that it, Hogan? Was that what—"

He nodded hastily; there was no time to wonder, hardly any time left to explain. Now she was here, he realized he'd never have stopped Greenface with any amount of buckshot—but they could get away if only they kept to the shadows.

The look of nightmare came back into Julia's eyes as she listened; her fingers dug painfully into his shoulder. "But, Hogan," she whispered, "it's so big . . . big as the trees, a lot of them!"

Hogan frowned at her uncomprehendingly until, watching him, Julia's expression began to change. He knew it mirrored the change in his own face, but he couldn't do anything about that.

"It could come right through them—" she whispered.

Hogan still wasn't able to talk.

"It could be right outside the house!" Julia's voice wasn't a whisper any more, and he put his hand over her mouth, gently enough, until her breathing steadied.

"Don't you *smell* it?" he murmured, close to her ear.

It was Greenface all right; the familiar oily odor was seeping into the air they breathed, growing stronger moment by moment until it became the smell of some foul tropical swamp, a wet, rank rotteness. Hogan was amazed to find he'd stopped shaking. He felt quick and strong and reckless—he knew he

couldn't afford to be reckless. He thought frantically.

"Look, Julia," he whispered, "it's dark in the cellar. No moonlight; nothing. Make it there alone?"

She nodded doubtfully.

"I'll put the fire out first," he explained in hasty answer to her look. "Be down right after you!"

"I'll help you," she gasped. All Julia's stubbornness was concentrated in the three words.

Hogan fought down an urgent impulse to slap her face hard, right and left. Like a magnified echo of that impulse was the vast soggy blow that smashed immediately against the outer lodge wall, above the door.

They stared stupidly. The whole house was shaking. The wall logs were strong, but a prolonged tinkling of broken glass announced that each of the shuttered windows on that side had been broken simultaneously. "The damn thing!" Hogan thought. "The damn thing! It's really come for me! If it hits the door—"

The ability to move returned to them together. They left the couch in a clumsy, frenzied scramble and reached the head of the cellar stairs not a step apart. With the second shattering crash, the telephone leaped from the wall beside Hogan. His hand on the stair railing, he stared back.

He couldn't see the door from there. The fire roared and danced in the hearth, as if it enjoyed being shaken up so roughly. The head of the eight-point buck had dropped off the cabinet and lay on the floor beside the fire, its glass eyes fixed in a red baleful glare on Hogan. Nothing else seemed changed.

"HOGAN!" Julia wailed aloud from the shadows at the foot of the stairs. He heard her start up again and turned to tell her to wait there.

Then Greenface hit the door.

Glass, wood and metal flew inward together with an indescribable explosive sound. Hogan slid down four steps and stopped again, his head on a level with the top of the stairs. Below him he heard Julia's choked breathing. Nothing else stirred.

A cool draft of air began to flow past his face. Then came a heavy scraping noise and the renewed clatter of glass.

"Hogan!" Julia sobbed recklessly. "Come down! IT'LL GET IN!"

"It can't!" Hogan breathed.

As if in answer, the stairs began to tremble under his feet. Wood splintered ponderously; the shaking continued and seemed to spread through the house. Then something smacked against the wall, just around the corner of the room that shut off Hogan's view of the door. Laboriously, like a floundering whale, Greenface was coming into the lodge.

At the foot of the stairs, Hogan caught his foot in a mess of telephone wires and nearly went headlong over Julia. She clung to him, trembling.

"Did you see it?"

"Just its head!" Hogan gasped. He was steering her by the arm through the dark cellar. "We gotta keep away from the stairs, out of the light. Stay there, will you? And, Julia, kid"—he was fumbling with the lock of the side entrance door—"keep awful quiet, please!"

"I will," she whispered scornfully. The timbers groaned overhead, and for a moment they stared up in tranced expectation, each sensing the other's thought. Julia gave a low, nervous giggle.

"Good thing that floor's double strength!"

"That's the fireplace, right over us," he said frowning. He opened the door an inch or so and peered out. "Look here, Julia!"

The shifting light of the fire streamed through the shattered frame of the main lodge door. The steps leading up to it had been crushed to kindling wood. As they stared, a shadow, huge and formless, dropped soundlessly across the lighted area. They shrank back.

"Oh, Hogan!" Julia whimpered. "It's horrible!"

"All of that," he said, with dry lips. "Do you feel anything—funny?"

She peered at him through the gloom. "Feel anything, Hogan?"

"Up here!" He put his fingertips to her temples. "Sort of buzzing?"

"Oh," she said; "yes, I do!" She was getting panicky again, and he squeezed her arm reassuringly. "What is it, Hogan?"

"A sort of sound our friend makes," he explained, "when he's feeling good. But it should be much louder. Julia, that thing's been out in the cold and rain all week. No sun at all. I should have remembered! I bet it *likes* that fire up there. It's getting friskier now, and that's why we hear it."

There was a moment's silence.

"Let's run for it, Hogan! The car's right up on the road."

"Uh-uh!" He shook his head. "We might make it all right, but Greenface can come along like a horse when it wants to . . . and the fire's pepping it up—it *might* know perfectly well that we're ducking around down here!"

"Oh, no!" she said, shocked.

"Anyway, it wouldn't settle anything. I got an idea—Julia, honey, promise just once you'll stay right here and not yell after me, or anything? I'll be right back."

"What you going to do?"

"I won't go out of the cellar," Hogan said soothingly. "Look, darling, there's no time to argue—do you promise, or do I lay you out cold?"

"I promise," she said after a sort of frosty gasp.

"What were you doing?"

"Letting out the kerosene tank." He was breathing hard. "Is *it* still there?"

"HOGAN!"

"All right!" he whispered excitedly. "I'm going to fix that devil's whistling. Now then, I'll put a match to it. But we won't leave just yet. Wait here as long as we can—and then slip over into the nearest cabin. No running around in the moonlight!"

He ducked off again. After a minute, she saw a pale flare light up the chalked brick wall at the end of the cellar, and realized he was holding the match to a wad of paper. The kerosene fumes went off suddenly with a faint *BOOM!* and the glare of yellow light drove the shadows back with a rush toward Julia.

She heard Hogan move around in the passageway behind a door to her left. There were two more muffled explosions; then he came out and closed the door softly behind him.

"Going up like pine shavings!" he muttered gleefully. "Well, we wanted a new lodge anyhow. Now, Julia—"

"It looks almost like a man, doesn't it, Hogan? Like a sick old man!"

Hogan hushed her nervously. The buzzing in his brain was louder now, rising and falling as if the strength of the thing were gathering and ebbing in waves. And Julia unconsciously had spoken too loud.

"Keep under the ledge of the window," he told her. "It hasn't any real eyes, but it sees things somehow just as well as you and I."

Julia subsided reproachfully, and he gave her arm a quick squeeze. "If it'll just stay put for another two minutes, the fire ought to catch it—"

From the corner of the cabin window he could see half of the main room of the lodge through the door Greenface had shattered. Greenface itself filled most of that space. It was hunched up before the fireplace, its great, red-splotched head bending and nodding toward the flames; in that attitude there was something vaguely human about it. But its foot ribbons sprawled over all the rest of the floor space like the tentacles of an octopus, and Hogan noticed they, too, were now splotched with red.

Most of his attention was directed toward the cellar windows of the lodge. Every one of them was alight with the flickering glare of the fires he had

spread, and that glare was deepening while smoke poured out through the open door. The gathering roar of the fire mingled in his mind with the soundless, nervous rasp that meant Greenface's strength was returning.

It was like a race between the two: whether the fire would trap the thing before the heat which the fire kindled made it alert enough to perceive its danger and escape. It wasn't just a question of its escaping, either! Hogan hadn't told Julia how convinced he was that Greenface knew the two of them were there, to be caught at leisure as soon as it recovered enough to want to make the exertion. But it would make the exertion anyhow the instant it sensed they were trying to get away.

WOULDN'T THAT FIRE EVER BREAK THROUGH?

Then it happened—with blinding suddenness.

The thing swung its head around from the fireplace and lunged hugely backward. In a flash it turned nearly transparent, and Hogan heard Julia cry out beside him—he hadn't told her about that particularly ghastly little trick. In the same moment, the vibration in his mind became like a ragged, piercing shriek, like pain, brief and intolerable.

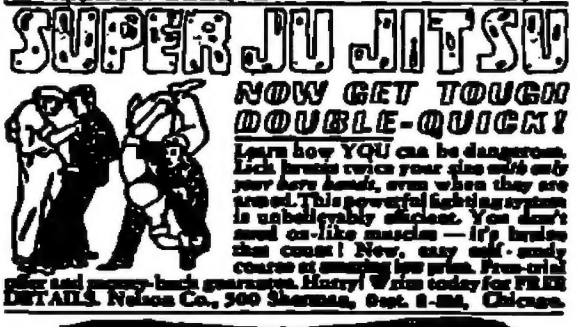
Hogan reeled away from the window, dragging Julia with him. There was a sudden series of muffled explosions—it wasn't till afterward he remembered the shells left lying on the table—then the lodge floor broke through into a cellar with a thundering crash, and the released flames leaped bellowing upward.

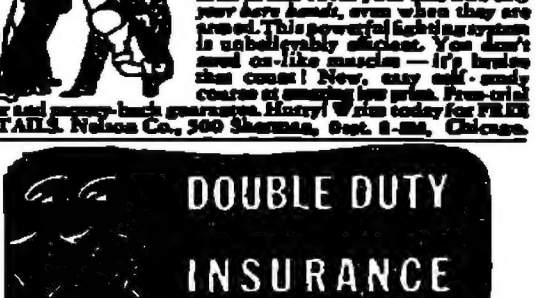
They were out of the cabin by then, running down toward the lake.

"Your Pa isn't going to like the idea," Hogan pointed out thoughtfully.

"He better like it!" Julia sounded a trifle grim. "But God bless the forest rangers—though they *were* kind of nasty!"

"They put the fire out anyhow," he said. "How would you care to mop up





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after a half-wit who lights a match to see how much kerosene he'd spilled in the dark?"

"Poor Hogan. . . . I got to tell you, too: I did get myself engaged in the city! I just couldn't go through with it without coming back first—"

"To find out if I really was batty? Can't blame you, honey! Well, it's all over with, anyhow," he said cheerily and put his arm around her.

"Hogan," Julia murmured after a suitably lengthy interval, "you think there might be anything left of it?"

He shook his head decisively. "Not after that bonfire. We can go have a look."

They walked up from the dock together toward the blackened, water-soaked mess that had been the lodge building. It was still an hour before dawn. They stood staring at it in silence. Greenface's funeral pyre had been worthy of a titan.

"We won't build here again till spring," Hogan told her at last. "We can winter in town, if you like. There won't be anything left of it then, for sure. There was nothing very solid about it, you know—just a big poisonous mass of jelly from the tropics. Winter would have killed it, anyhow.

"Those red spots; it was rotting last week—it never really had a chance."

"You aren't feeling sorry for it, are you?"

"Well, in a way," Hogan admitted. He kicked a cindered two-by-four apart with his foot and stood there frowning. "It was just a big crazy freak shooting up all alone in a world where it didn't fit in, and where it could only blunder around and do a lot of damage and die. I wonder how smart it really was and whether it ever understood the fix it was in."

"Quit worrying about it!" Julia commanded.

Hogan grinned down at her. "O. K.," he said.

"And kiss me," said Julia.

THE END.

She SAID: I'm sorry I can't go with you tonight..

But She really THOUGHT: I'm ashamed to be seen out with such a SKINNY WEAKLING!

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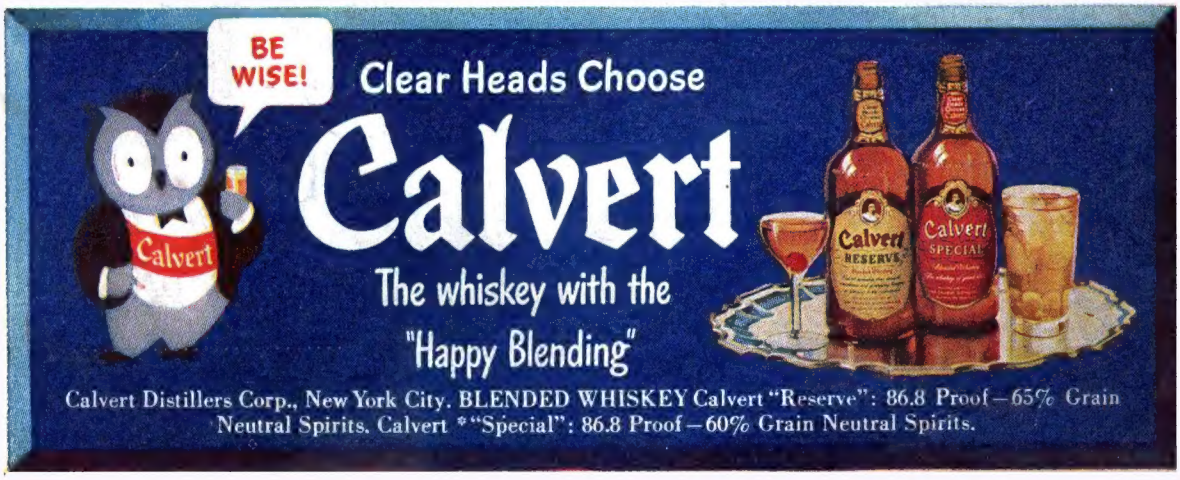
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